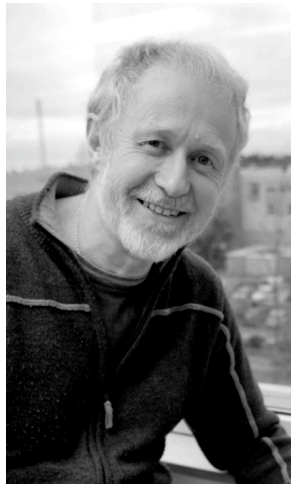


THE ELGAR ENIGMAS



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Also by Simon Boswell
The Seven Symphonies: A Finnish Murder Mystery
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Britishisms Explained

Asian (person) in UK usage primarily refers to somebody from
the Indian subcontinent

biscuit = US cookie

breeze block = US cinder block

Brum = Birmingham (UK)

Camberwell beauty (butterfly) : US name 'mourning cloak'

catch somebody out = notice somebody's attempts at hiding their secrets,
mistakes or dishonesty

chip fat = deep fat for frying French fries [*i.e.* Br. 'chips']

C of E = Church of England

dish out = distribute

double Dutch = incomprehensible language or speech

GBH = Grievous Bodily Harm (legal) = serious physical assault

gen = short for 'general information'

get up somebody's nose = seriously irritate somebody

HRH = His/Her Royal Highness

lark = harmless piece of mischief

lay-by = additional parking space beside a road

lorry = US truck

MP = Member of Parliament

prise off = US pry off

rabbit on = talk incessantly [*Cockney rhyming slang:*
'rabbit & pork' >> 'talk']

scatty = absentminded, empty-headed, flighty

sponge (cake)

sussed = caught out [*see above*], detected

toffee-nosed = snobbishly pretentious and supercilious

UWE = University of the West of England

wellies = Wellington boots = rubber boots

windscreen = US windshield

For more differences between British and American English, please visit:

<http://www.elgarenigmas.com/britishisms.html>

THE ELGAR ENIGMAS

A Musical Mystery

by

Simon Boswell



Finnish Evolutionary Enterprises

International Edition
Copyright © Simon Boswell, 2009
ISBN 978-1-60145-786-8

The ideas expressed in the myelgar.co.uk essays by the novel's fictional character Sir David Powys Hughes are to be understood as a non-fictional attempt by the author, Simon Boswell, to present a brief commentary on the life and works of the English composer, Edward Elgar.

With the obvious exceptions of the people referred to in the myelgar.co.uk essays, all characters in this publication are fictitious and their resemblance to any real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*Book cover designed by Todd Engel
Author photo by Compic / Jukka Ojala*

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In loving memory of my father

Richard Peter Boswell

This book is a work of fiction which includes some non-fictional elements. I trust that, by the end of the story, every reader will be clear about where the distinction lies.

Simon Boswell



Referring to the fourteen people "*pictured within*" his orchestral *Variations On An Original Theme [Enigma]*, Opus 36, Edward Elgar wrote in a letter from Turin, dated October 1911: "*It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect on the original theme & each one attempts a solution of the Enigma...*"

Some readers may be tempted to seek parallels between characters in this novel and members of Edward Elgar's immediate circle of family and friends in the closing years of the nineteenth century. If such connections exist, they can only be oblique or cryptic — perhaps reflecting Edward's celebrated love of anagrams and crossword puzzles — and are unlikely to correspond, fiction to fact, in many details of either appearance or personality.

* * *

In his book *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, Jerrold Northrop Moore reports that Edward was *an enthusiast for supernatural stories...*

Enigma

A fragile, dark-haired girl on the verge of womanhood sits motionless at the piano. She is no longer playing, yet her hands remain poised over the keyboard. She leans forward as if listening to sounds that have already died away. A mass of ebony hair cascades from her inclined head, obscuring her face and brushing the backs of her hands. A minute passes. Her position is unchanged. She seems frozen in time, the victim or beneficiary of some fairy-tale spell.

The room in which she sits is large and airy. A well-worn, well-polished parquet floor stretches beneath two comfortably upholstered armchairs and a sofa to a pair of sashed bay windows on the opposite wall. Spring sunlight splashes in, filtered through the many seven-leaved hands of a horse chestnut tree that reaches out from the street beside the house. The tree is in flower, decked with white, rose-flecked, pagoda-like blossoms. Bees and other pollinating insects are in eager attendance.

Still the girl does not move.

From elsewhere in the house occasional sounds reach the room: light metallic clatterings, ceramic scrapings, high-pitched whirrings. Vague, muffled fragments of conversation float through the open windows.

And now the girl awakens from her trance. In ultraslow-motion her head begins to rise, her arms spread horizontally and her spine

arches backwards. She is an opening flower. Delicate features are revealed as the dark hair falls away. A sigh escapes her barely parted lips. Brown eyes gaze at the ceiling... until, at last, she recoils her body and rises to step light-footed from the piano stool.

Moving across the room with the fluid, skittish grace of a somnambulist she comes to rest beside the right-hand bay window. Here she will stay for a while. In this room it is her other point of equilibrium, a point of vantage from where she surveys the well-kept lawn below her, the clustered rose bushes awaiting their cream and scarlet blooms, the clematis, pelargoniums, irises and now-fading tulips; and beyond the honeysuckle-covered red sandstone walls are other gardens, other houses, their roofs step-stoning to a horizon of gently sloping, interlocking hills.

She often stands here... and sometimes tears well into her eyes — though not today: a faint smile caresses her lips and there will be no tears — but sometimes she stands before this window gazing across the vastness outside her circumscribed world of reassuring familiarity, and she weeps soundlessly. Could this signify an awareness of her detachment, of her eternal loneliness? It seems unlikely. Has she then caught a glimpse of her own mortality? Presumably not... but who can tell? Her thoughts are an undisclosed secret.

Before long, she will return to the piano. She will set her hands above the keys and, when she is quite ready, will again begin to play.

Variation I

The strange events surrounding Caroline 'Alice' Lawtham, which would popularly become known as 'the Elgar enigmas', might never have occurred and certainly would not have come to public attention if Pandora Bell had decided against taking up Moira's invitation. It was a surrender to circumstances and she arrived late... But in the overlapping continuum of events — from the mystical flutter of a butterfly's wing to the careless stepping into the path of a double-decker bus — there will always be moments which, in retrospect, seem to define a critical fork in the road. Choose this alternative or that and your life, carrying many others with it, will take a radically divergent course.

When Pandora told Moira in the corridor of the psychology department that she'd think about it, she had no intention of doing any such thing. All she wanted was to get out of the building, go straight home, and nurse her wounds in private.

"Think it through. It'll do you good," Moira had coaxed. "No point brooding over those two degenerates. Shouldn't let 'em get to you. The world's swarming with males... and still a precious few worth ferreting around for. See you later, then? About seven thirty?"

"Maybe," Pandora said... meaning *Not a chance!*

But arriving home had altered that assessment. Could she really face sitting here alone with so much anger and frustration? Moira

Variation I

was probably right. Wallowing in a double rejection of this magnitude was unhealthy. Even Pandora's training advised against it.

She dumped her bag in the hallway and drifted into the kitchen, meaning to brew a pot of tea, instead perching benumbed on a stool by the worktop, still smarting from that unctuous and hypocritical apology earlier in the day from the faculty head: *So sorry, Doctor Bell. The board has decided in favour of Doctor Camberwell. We trust you'll give him your every support.*

The humiliation of it... to be passed over for a twit like Camberwell with scarcely half her research experience and kudos. The common wisdom was she'd get the senior lectureship. Not that Camberwell himself could be blamed. He'd applied in good faith, the same way she had. No, the bloody Prof was so obviously behind it. He'd been the one to sway the board against her. Professional misogynists like him weren't supposed to exist nowadays. But there were still a few relics lurking in the woodwork of the academic establishment, privately justifying their prejudices with outdated arguments about the unreliability of younger women in positions of authority.

Pandora could guess the mode of his thoughts: *Next thing you know, she'll be sliding off to brood a couple of offspring or more. Happens all the time. Continuity's what we need. Obvious to everyone!* Not that he'd dare voice such an opinion to the board. He would have couched it in quite different terms, emphasizing her competitor's team spirit and allegiance to the department — implying her own lack of such laudable qualities; if not team spirit and allegiance, then something equally intangible and incapable of documentary proof. And to think those morons on the board had been so easily taken in! She'd done a reasonable interview, hadn't she? Her existing research on autistic spectrum disorder should be sexy enough for anyone with even a partially developed academic sensibility. What the hell else were they looking for in a candidate?

Yes, what else? And now the self-undermining began, the creeping self-doubts. Had the board been right to choose someone

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else? Could she really be relied on to hold fast to the departmental helm? Wasn't her own research more important to her than passing on the torch of knowledge to the next half-generation? In truth, she was barely a decade older than most of the students she was expected to nurture. She still had so much to explore of her own. And then, well... her personality could be a little abrasive at times, with a patience level for fools on the lower range of average — a measurable amount below average, to be honest. Perhaps the insipid Camberwell Beauty, as the more spiteful female students referred to him, better fit the board's requirements after all...

Enough self-flagellation! Worse, self-pity! She got up, pulled a half-empty bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge and trailed it behind her into the living room... It was there that self-pity threatened to engulf her completely. She might have taken this professional setback in her stride if she weren't already reeling from a more personal assault. And there the Yankee Upstart sat, still smiling at her from the mantelpiece.

She should have taken the framed photograph and dashed it to the ground; or better, ripped the image from the frame and ritually burned it. Instead, she carried it to the sofa, lying back to gaze with tangled feelings into those sensuous, mildly mocking grey eyes. The Yankee Upstart... a term of endearment when they'd thrown playful insults at one another on a daily basis. Now she meant it with a reluctant vengeance. *Running off back to Yankeeland. Running away from commitment.* And how casually he'd informed her, like he was popping down to Tesco's for a six-pack:

Sorry, Pan. Time to move on. Been a blast, but got to get back. Glory and advancement beckon.

So then she'd debased herself by suggesting she apply for a post of her own at Berkeley. After all, the States were where they'd met, when she'd been on a research fellowship at Albany. Yes, she felt she could consider a more permanent life in North America. He'd followed her across the Atlantic. She could just as easily follow him back west to California. Her CV was adequate. She could get something appropriate.

Variation I

No, Pan. Not what I want, was all he'd said. She was no longer included in the future he envisaged. He was leaving on his own.

So she'd watched him over the next 48 hours — making his arrangements, stripping the cupboards and drawers of his belongings, purposefully disbanding their life together — while she wandered aimlessly from bedroom to living room to kitchen and back again, anticipating the emptiness to come, staring out of the upstairs windows, not talking to him and not wishing or perhaps daring to.

They hadn't exchanged goodbyes. She'd left the flat without a word two hours before he'd be taking his taxi to the airport. And then she'd walked herself to physical exhaustion — from Totterdown to Westbury Village, later down to Seamills, at last catching a bus to the centre and another back home to arrive well after he'd gone.

There was no note. No envelope containing words of farewell, apology or regret. Just his house key lying on the kitchen table.

And two days later on the Tuesday afternoon had come that second appalling revelation. She'd been denied the promotion. At least the Prof had had the decency and nerve to tell her face to face rather than let her find the decision in the post the next day, long after everyone else in the faculty had heard about it on the grapevine. Or was he taking this opportunity to gloat? Stumbling and fuming from the Prof's study, Pandora ran into Moira.

"Wow! That's some radical haircut!" Moira said in gleeful amazement, but her expression changed when she heard the news. As the only other female junior lecturer in the department, Moira had been supportive. She'd shared in the anger and the disparagement of the Prof's transparent tampering. She'd talked of similar slights to women in and out of academia.

"Does Kurt know yet?" she'd asked. "He'll be furious!"

So Pandora was forced to admit there *was* no Kurt; that after three and a half years he'd walked out on her with no discussion of the reasons other than to say he'd got an interesting job offer in

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California... no explanation of why she so suddenly and totally failed to fit into his plans.

"My God, you seemed set for the duration. You seemed so tight."

Pandora said nothing. She'd thought so herself. And now she doubted her ability to read anything or anybody.

It was then that Moira made the invitation.

"We're having some friends over this evening. Greg's birthday. Thought we'd make a bit of noise for the neighbours — just so they'd know. Won't be that many. We only came up with the idea over breakfast. A dozen. Maybe two. Some of Greg's friends, some of mine. You're on the agenda, of course. It'll take your mind off."

And now, alone in the flat, after finishing up the Chardonnay and returning again and again to that damned photograph of Kurt and herself smiling together in front of Brunel's bridge with the Avon Gorge plunging away behind, Moira's offer was looking like a plausible escape.

Pandora made no move before nine thirty. Until then she'd doubted she could screw up courage enough to get off the sofa. She showered interminably; dressed and made up on dazed autopilot, wondering after the event why she'd put on Kurt's favourite powder-blue dress — the one he'd praised for the way it traced her figure so explicitly. She wasn't dressing for Kurt anymore, was she?

The phoned taxi took twenty minutes to arrive, and Pandora didn't reach the party in Clifton until half past eleven.

Neither Moira nor Greg made any mention of Pandora's lateness. They seemed pleased she'd come at all.

"Like your hair," said Greg. "Helluva sexy. Can I stroke it?"

Greg, of course, had been briefed on the latest miserable details. He was chivalrous and attentive. He poured her drinks, which she drank gratefully. He offered her samosas and snacky bites on cocktail sticks. She ate a few dutifully. He escorted her from group to group, doing his best to draw her into conversation.

Variation I

She was pliant and cooperative, but felt she was only killing time until that awful moment when she'd find herself again in the empty house on Totterdown.

A little later, Moira took over and steered Pandora out onto the tiny balcony for a girl-to-girl. Together they tried to make sense of Kurt's sudden absconding. It was clear now to Pandora that he'd known for a long time he didn't want a permanent relationship. He'd been offered a way out and taken it. A cowardly desertion? Or a realistic and pragmatic exit?

"He should've talked it through with you," complained Moira. "To up and leave with no proper explanation!"

Pandora wondered whether Kurt's method wasn't as good as any. If he no longer wanted her company, what was there to discuss? Make a clean break and be done with it; although this realization wouldn't plug the vast hole he'd left in her life or diminish the sense of emotional loss and mutilated pride.

Eventually Moira was obliged to resume her duties as hostess...

"Better brew some coffee," she said. "Don't want the guests crashing out all over the floor... or in the toilet... or, God forbid, on our freshly laundered sheets. Bring you a mug when it's ready."

Left alone, Pandora leant over the stone balustrade to gaze across the Clifton rooftops at the amber-glowing lights of the Cumberland Basin.

Moments later somebody joined her on the narrow balcony.

"Amazing place to live," said the newcomer, thoughtful rather than effusive. He placed his elbows on the wall beside her, mere inches away, but stared out into space without glancing in her direction. "Wonder how the hell they swung it. Some people would kill and then confess to the judge for a few months of residence on Royal York Crescent — especially up here at attic level."

Turning her head a fraction, Pandora studied the owner of the voice. He was her own age, maybe a couple of years older. Longish dark hair curling around his neck; his profile — all she could see so far — strongly defined with a long straight nose and a

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squared-off chin. She was pretty sure he'd just joined the party. If he'd been there earlier, she would have noticed.

As to his comment about Moira and Greg's flat... Moira *had* once explained to Pandora how they'd managed to 'swing it'. Something about an aunt or a second cousin. Pandora no longer remembered the details. But it was true. Many would covet living up here. Royal York Crescent was one of Bristol's showpieces, an elegant curving Regency terrace of creamy stone and delicate wrought-iron balconies to match the best of those at Bath or Cheltenham. And with its dramatic position on the edge of the Avon Gorge, not far from the famous suspension bridge, it was visible from many points south of the city. The corollary, of course, was the spectacular panorama from the upper floors of the terrace itself, some features of which Pandora's new companion began to remark upon...

"Good view of the Bristol City ground from up here. Wouldn't be surprised if Greg watches the matches with binoculars. That's the Nova Scotia Pub down there. And do you see to the right of Goldney House? They're the masts of the *SS Great Britain*. Wonderful restoration..." this referring to Brunel's ocean liner of 1843 — the first ever built entirely of iron — now returned from a watery grave in the Falklands to permanent dock in its birthplace. "And the Cabot Tower, of course. Wonder if that elegant bit of spire peeking over the edge of Brandon Hill is St Mary Redcliffe."

Pandora knew these landmarks perfectly well. She'd lived in Bristol for nearly two years. But he seemed to be describing the scene for his own benefit, not hers; with an air of personal attachment, as if the city were something in which he took great pride.

"If you look over there, much further off... that's Totterdown. I love the way the houses seem to tumble down the side of the hill."

"Totterdown's where I live," Pandora said quietly.

His head at last turned in her direction.

"A terraced two-up-two-down," she explained. "Not palatial. At the top of Vale Street."

Variation I

"Vale Street," he echoed wistfully. "Dad used to terrify all his visitors to Bristol by driving them up Vale Street in the old Rover. Part of what he called 'the alternative Bristol tour'. Some say it's the steepest motorable street in Europe. You get the feeling the car's about to tip backwards over its rear wheels. I loved that as a kid."

"You were born in Bristol?" Pandora asked, already assuming the answer from his slight Bristolian burr.

"The Maternity Hospital," he nodded, "as was. Name's changed to St Michael's. If you look at the skyline there..." he pointed almost due south... "on Dundry Hill, you can just make out the tower of Dundry Church. Our family lived close by in a rambling old house on Spire Road. Used to be the vicarage back in Victorian times — before the paupered C of E had to move their representative into humbler accommodation."

He eased himself from the balcony wall to lean sideways against it and face her properly.

"I'm Ron," he said, without formality.

"Pandora," she responded, trying to inject a brightness into her voice she didn't feel. "Most people call me Pan. Except my family still insists on Panda. When I was a kid, Father told everyone it was short for Pandemonium."

The Yankee Upstart, on the other hand, had often re-expanded 'Pan' to further variations of his own, like 'Panacea', 'Pantheon' or 'Pantihose'; even such absurdities as 'Pancake Day' and 'Panic Button'. Pandora once learned how he'd referred to her amongst his Albany Uni male cronies as "The Box" or "My Little Box Of Tricks". She'd confronted him about it in private. But he only grinned and, in persuasive New York tones, chastised her for excessive prudery. *What a prickly Pangolin you are! Come and show Kurt how much you forgive him. I love it when you're an angry Panther.* In Britain, except for the occasional migrating Australian, 'box' only conjured up classical connotations. Pandora assumed he'd therefore dropped it.

"And was he right?"

"Was who right?"

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"Your father. Were you really Pandemonium?"

"Probably," Pandora said, making an effort to reorient herself to present company. "I *was* a bit of a tomboy."

"Not anymore?" Ron reached out briefly to trace, with three fingers, her bristly, close-cropped hair from behind one ear and down the side of her neck. Pandora wasn't sure she welcomed this intrusive, if tenuous, physical contact... but concluded it was harmless.

"Too short?" she asked.

He made a show of assessing the effect. "A lot depends," he said, "on the shape of the head. In your case, I'd say it works very well."

"Had it done yesterday on impulse. Seemed the moment for a visible change in my life. A gesture of attitude really. Always worn my hair long in the past. Expect I'll grow it out again."

"Presumably the colour isn't quite natural..."

She gave a prim shake of the head.

"Well, I can see from your eyes you're no albino. But it does heighten the visual impact. I'm impressed."

In silence they continued to appraise one another.

She supposed he must be hitting on her. But he wasn't being too obvious about it. His manner was relaxed and natural. And there was something reassuring about his face. He'd make a good psychotherapist, she thought. He might *be* one, for all she knew. Not bad-looking... though that was only a theoretical observation. She wasn't in the market for a new face right now. She'd need a very, *very* long time to lick wounds before venturing into another relationship — even a casual one. *Especially* a casual one. Anyway, where were the mocking, sensuous grey eyes? These were a chestnut brown.

"Music or psychology?" he asked. "Or could you be some rarer breed?"

"Guess..." she said.

He creased his forehead. "All right... going for the rarity angle... something exotic in the zoology line. An expert on the mating habits of wild waterfowl. The bald coot, for example."

Variation I

"I asked for that. I'm psychology. Which presumably makes you music... Greg's side of the fence."

"Bristol Uni," he nodded.

"Me too," she said.

"So Moira's *your* colleague."

"One of the few likeable examples."

"Bit harsh on the rest."

"You know what they say about psychologists. We only enter the field to explore our own hang-ups. Most of us are unbearably neurotic freaks."

"I'll go along with the freaky bit," he laughed. "Haven't detected much in the way of neurosis so far."

"So far is nowhere. You don't know me at all."

"We could work on it... What's your field? Teaching? Research?"

Pandora hesitated, but took the bait: "You know what ASD is?"

He looked blank.

"Autistic Spectrum Disorder. My field — what I've done research on over the last few years. Got into it at Albany University."

"Where's that?"

"Eastern New York State. Autism's an important research focus there. It's why I got drawn in, I suppose. Strange and fascinating stuff."

"Only know the usual about autism. Kids who don't communicate with their parents. Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*."

"Even specialists have only scratched the surface. But there's been some progress the last decade. PET and MRI studies in real time of the living autistic brain. There's a very long way to go. It's not as rare a condition as most people think. Nowadays around 1 in every 500 of the population are diagnosed autistic. Roughly four times as many boys as girls. But you have to realize there's a whole range of disorders involved. That's why we use the term 'autistic spectrum'."

Moira reappeared on the balcony and presented Pandora with a mug of steaming black coffee. "Ah, you've met Ronald. Well

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done," she announced, in brusque maternal tones. "Coffee for you too, Ron? White-one-sugar?" And she was gone again.

"That's why you use the term 'autistic spectrum'..." Ron prompted.

"Yes, a spectrum of disorders. At one end you've got those more mildly affected — Asperger syndrome we'd usually call it. They're often 'mainstream'. They can hold down jobs and raise families. Some even get PhDs and write books about their autistic life experiences. But the ones at the opposite end of the spectrum are severely affected. They need lifelong support. They never acquire speech, and they can't interact with society in a way which allows them any genuine independence. They're the ones I've tended to concentrate on. It's a tough nut to crack — I mean, to understand what's going on in their heads. They don't give much away. You can't get direct feedback. You just observe their behaviour and try to interpret it."

"Is there any kind of cure?"

"Not on the near horizon. Maybe one day we'll figure out the physiological processes involved, perhaps develop drugs that'll counteract or compensate for the neurochemical imbalances that might be causing the problem. We may even manage some kind of genetic repair. But, for the time being, the best we can do is try to help on a case-by-case basis. A lot of treatments and therapies have sprung up. Dietary approaches, behavioural therapy programmes. Not all treatments are recognized by the medical and scientific communities. But parents of autistic kids are desperate to try anything that's going."

Pandora could talk on her pet subject for hours. Not everyone wanted to listen, but Ron seemed sympathetic.

"Tell me," he said, "how does a typical autistic child behave?"

"I'm not sure about 'typical'. You can have as many variations of autistics as there are variations in the rest of the population. But okay... we can make generalizations. You'd expect a 'normal' baby to study its mother's face and enjoy touching and cuddling. Autistic children avoid eye-contact and behave woodenly when embraced — even forcefully resist physical contact. They don't

Variation I

seem to recognize family members as significantly different from other objects around them. And they're incapable of empathizing. The concept that another person might have a view of the world different from their own is quite alien to them... Then their language development's slow, if there's any at all. Half of them are mute. Those that do develop language might use it inappropriately. They repeat words and phrases over and over again... In play they ignore other children. And their play doesn't involve make-believe. They don't pretend their dolls or toy cars are real, like most children would. They line them up in ordered rows, open and close lids and doors repetitively, watch fascinated while they turn, twist or spin moving parts — for minutes, sometimes hours on end... And routines and rituals are desperately important for them. Any changes in daily habits — even the moving of a piece of furniture from one place in the room to another — can seriously upset them. Sometimes it leads to destructive behaviour or physical violence towards themselves or those around them. One intelligent, high-functioning autistic described her life as a confusing jumble of events and places — a mess of objects, people, sights and sounds. She found it all distressingly chaotic. Applying routines or ritualistic repetitions helps to impose order."

Pandora paused to sip her coffee. Moira made another brief and this time silent appearance to bring Ron a mug of his own. Pandora wasn't quite sure on the dimly lit balcony, but Moira seemed to be walking on tiptoe.

"Autistics don't seem able," Pandora went on, "to grasp any kind of holistic realities. You and I go for the 'gist'. They usually focus on the details. You might say, they don't see the wood for the trees. But, anyway," she gave a wry grin, "I'm doing all the talking here. What's your special area?"

Ron shrugged. "I teach. Piano and music theory. Composition was my main subject at the Royal College. Somehow I never found a genuine style of my own. So I seem to have dropped out of the scene altogether. Haven't written anything or had anything performed for years."

"And your instrument?"

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"Piano. And I sing a bit. Play the violin badly. Even worse on the clarinet."

Pandora considered for a while...

Then she asked: "Do you know what a savant is?"

"You'd better remind me," Ron said.

"What used to be called an 'idiot savant'. Fortunately we've shortened the terminology. It means a person who's mentally handicapped in some way or other — degrees of autism are typical in this case. But a savant also has some very specific and astounding abilities. Most common is the 'calendar calculator'. A calendar savant might not be able to tie his own shoe-laces. But if you give him your birth date including the year, he'll instantly tell you what day of the week it was on. Probably he can extrapolate back to a date in an earlier century — Abraham Lincoln's birth date, for example — or into the future, like the 23rd of May 2147. And he'll get those right too. He'll tell you if the date is a Monday or a Thursday or whatever. It's a strange talent with little functional use, but seems to be based on a mixture of memorizing specific points in the historic calendar and on an intuitive understanding of the numeric principles involved — where leap years occur and so on."

"In *Rain Man*," said Ron, "Dustin Hoffman memorized the sequence of a pack of cards after he'd looked through them once. Made him a major force at the gambling table."

Pandora nodded. "It's another example of the savant phenomenon. And some have extraordinary arithmetical skills. You can give a 'numbers savant' a random five-digit numeral. He'll tell you within seconds whether it's a prime number or not... Then there's the artist savant. They're usually self-taught. But their drawing or painting skills are way above the norm. And their visual memories are exceptional. You can take one to a Gothic cathedral, for example. He'll go home and draw it all from memory in exquisite detail."

She halted for a moment, disciplining herself. She had a tendency to career on and lose her listeners.

Variation I

"Come to think of it... I've heard about this kind of thing in music as well," Ron said.

"Yes, the musical savant. That would probably interest you the most. They have exceptional playing skills. Again they're often self-taught. Many of them suffer from impaired sight or blindness. But not always. The piano's the most common choice... probably 'cause it's so clearly laid out and more accessible — more often found in the home than other instruments. I'm no music expert, but I do know their musical memories can be prodigious. They're able to reproduce music by ear alone and with amazing accuracy. On the piano that's going to include the harmony, even if the original was, say, for a jazz band or a symphony orchestra."

"Do they improvise? Do they compose?"

"Sometimes... though not in every case."

"And you say they're often autistic?"

"The majority are, yes."

"Have you ever met one in the flesh?"

"Musical savants are very, very rare. But..." Pandora hesitated. She knew exactly why she'd brought this subject up. Did she really want to take things a step further? Her instincts were telling her 'yes'. Unfortunately, at this point in her life, she had a greatly diminished faith in her own instincts and judgement.

"But what...?" Ron's eyebrows were raised.

"Fact is," said Pandora, edging further towards a decision, "I'll be meeting my first musical savant on Friday. A thirteen-year-old autistic girl. Right here in Bristol — in Redland. I'm hoping her father'll let me study her on a regular basis."

"Don't suppose you could take me along, could you?" Ron seemed half joking, half hopeful. "I'd love to see her in action."

"Well... it might be possible." There, she'd said it. Of course, she could always retract the offer later, if she thought better of it in the light of tomorrow's Totterdown dawn. "As I say, I'm not a music specialist. So it could be helpful to have an expert's opinion. Don't know if you'd be interested to come along as a kind of informed observer — I mean, maybe just this once... or even..."

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Ron didn't let her continue. "The whole thing sounds fascinating! Friday, did you say? What time?"

They talked for another hour about savants and autism. Ron wanted to read up on the subject, preferably before the visit to Redland.

"Got plenty of books at home," Pandora said. "Want to borrow a couple?"

"Yes, great. Did you drive yourself here?"

Pan shook her head.

"What if I give you a lift home? Then I can pick them up straight away. Give me a chance to catch up before Friday."

So they left at once.

Pan kept him waiting at her front door while she located the books. She didn't know if he'd been hoping for an invitation inside — perhaps for an extended visit till the morning. But when she acknowledged his thanks and let him turn and walk back to his car, he showed no disappointment.

Perhaps she would have preferred that he had.

* * *

"Please take a little breather, Mrs Matthews. Why don't you give your mouth a nice rinse?"

Michael Lawtham let the main tool of his trade slide back into its holder and stood up to stretch his back and shoulders. Last patient of the day, for which he was grateful. Last patient of the week, in fact. And still only 3.45 pm. He usually gave himself a shorter day on Fridays. Now he'd have a chance to unwind before the visitors arrived at seven.

On this warm spring afternoon, the sash windows were both raised a few inches from the sills to help the air circulate. The sound of a piano permeated through from the floor above — a bright sonority, though made less distinct by the thick-leaved horse chestnut that reached its branches across the back of the house. This sound had been a background to Michael's life for many years. He wasn't musical himself. But especially on clement

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days like today when his daughter's playing carried down into the surgery, he found it comforting. Many of his patients seemed to enjoy the diversion. They often commented on it. Perhaps it calmed their fears of the surgery chair.

Michael rarely allowed himself to brood on the past. But today marked the tenth anniversary of his wife's death and his thoughts were very much with her. His first months as a widower had been a torment of self-recriminations and endless imaginings of what could have been — what should have been. Time had diminished those feelings, but not eradicated them.

From the start, he'd been bewildered that a woman such as Alice could take an interest in him. She was a saleswoman for a dental supplies company and he'd met her at a conference in Brighton. She was attractive and outgoing. Michael had long accepted he was neither of these. He was ordinary-looking with a retiring nature, although he did have a healthy awareness of his self-worth. He knew he was competent at his job. He had a pleasant chair-side manner which his patients appreciated. And he was always well organised, both professionally and in his private life. He was the kind of person who kept strict records of earnings and expenditure. It would be an impossibility for him to be late with his income tax returns. He also enjoyed keeping statistics and making lists. These features were perhaps his and Alice's greatest connection. She valued order and careful planning as much as he did. In her travelling sales work she was methodical and efficient, appreciated by her employers for the regular if not stunning income she made on their behalf.

When Alice had agreed to marry him, Michael had been almost overwhelmed with joy. Never before had he experienced such a buoyancy of spirit. And that feeling had persisted into their marriage.

Shortly before meeting Alice, Michael had negotiated a sizeable mortgage and invested in a dental practice on Redland Green Road in Bristol. The purchase included the whole three-storey semi-detached house, with the surgery, lab/workshop, reception and waiting room on the ground floor, and the four-

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bedroomed residential quarters on the upper two and a half floors. Initially, so many bedrooms had seemed an extravagance. Michael had considered converting part of the upper floors into a separate flat with its own stair access at the side of the building. That way he could either rent it off or sell it outright. But, as soon as they were engaged, Alice vetoed the proposal. "We'll be needing all of the bedrooms," she'd said. "We're going to have at least three children."

The first child — their only child, as it turned out — arrived a mere ten months after their wedding. This event further compounded Michael's happiness. Their daughter was a pretty little thing, and Michael insisted, correctly, that she'd been blessed with her mother's looks rather than his own; although she did have Michael's dark hair. They called her Caroline.

All seemed well at first; but Alice began to wonder if Caroline's behaviour was entirely normal. At six months she seemed to have little interest in her parents. Her eyes moved around the room from the vantage point of her cot or bouncy chair but rarely settled for more than a second or two on her mother or father. Even more distressing, the child gave no positive response to being held or cuddled. She seemed almost oblivious to her parents' existence, though she did readily accept food when either of them spooned it into her mouth.

At first Michael tried to soothe Alice's concerns. Before long, he also felt they should seek professional advice. The diagnosis, made before Caroline reached twelve months, was that she was very likely autistic. Subsequent developments — or lack of them — confirmed these fears.

Caroline made no attempt to speak, although she did hum to herself — at first tunelessly, but gradually more recognizably. By two years old she was accurately singing children's songs that her mother played to her on cassette. She imitated the words without appearing to understand their significance — as if they were mere sounds, equivalent perhaps to other musical parameters like pitch, rhythm and timbre. Soon Caroline had taught herself to operate the cassette player and spent much of her time selecting music and

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listening to it. She watched the turning spindles of the cassette player as if hypnotized.

And yet many of the horror stories that Alice and Michael had heard about autistic behaviour failed to materialise in Caroline's case. She was an unusually serene child, especially when listening to music. There were no screaming tantrums of frustration. She never physically attacked her guardians or mutilated herself with bites to her arms or hands. Instead, if distressed by something, she would rock back and forth. Tears would run down her cheeks, and soft sobbing sounds would rise from deep in her throat. It was an effective way of gaining a response. No one could resist such pathos. If at all possible, the source of her distress was eliminated.

Michael and Alice learned by trial and error the things that Caroline found upsetting. Leaving the familiarity of her own home was one. But some expeditions were necessary: visits to doctors and psychiatric specialists, for example. Music was the only comfort that consistently worked when Caroline was in strange surroundings. A journey could be achieved as long as a favourite tape was playing in the car. Before venturing inside an unknown building, they would equip their daughter with a personal stereo and headphones; then she could focus on reassuring and familiar sounds rather than unfamiliar and threatening sights.

Caroline also made it clear that no one should interfere with the ordering of her cassettes and CDs at home. She had a strict arrangement on the shelves and could bear no deviation. Each new acquisition was assigned its own place and must henceforth be replaced after use. Only Caroline knew the logic of this ordering. It bore no obvious pattern or sequence in terms of genre, performer, instrumentation or even the design of the case inlay.

The fact that Caroline was generally so placid made it possible to arrange day-care in her own home with a qualified special-needs nanny. This, in turn, meant that, unlike some parents of autistic children who are obliged to downsize or even abandon their careers, both Michael and Alice could, in theory, continue to work.

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Michael's work was in the same building. He was on hand for any emergency. Alice's took her much further afield, even requiring she spend nights away from home. By the time Caroline had passed her third birthday, Alice was finding this situation unacceptable. Her place was at home with her daughter. She gave her employer a month's notice.

Four days before the termination of her contract, the unthinkable happened...

Caroline's usual nanny had phoned in sick. Michael began searching for the number of a stand-in they'd occasionally used. Time was running out before his first patient of the day would arrive and he seemed unable to locate his address book. In desperation he called his wife. The dental supplies manufacturer who employed her provided both a company car and a mobile phone.

When Michael rang, Alice was already on the road, after a B&B stay in Bangor, and was heading southeast along the A5 to call on a customer in Betws-y-Coed. She would never get there. Driving at close to 50 mph she attempted to juggle the cellular phone and the handbag lying on the paper-strewn seat beside her, trying to locate her *own* address book. The phone fell on the floor in front of the passenger seat, and Michael heard both the concussion of the fall and her curse as she presumably leant forward to retrieve it. "Sorry, I dropped the ph..." she began but was interrupted by a loud and extended noise that sounded like the clash and tearing of metal. Even as it continued, he heard a scream that chilled his heart. It broke off in the middle, and there was a long silence.

A lorry carrying a full load of scrap metal destined for a yard in Bangor had been travelling from Betws-y-Coed on a left-hand bend. No one knows what distracted the lorry driver. He later had no recollection himself of what had happened. A witness in another vehicle said he drifted a little across the central double-white line and was partly astride it when he collided with a small Renault travelling in the opposite direction. In that Renault was Alice Lawtham.

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Michael clung to the home telephone, calling out again and again for his wife to speak to him. He could hear someone moaning — someone who sounded terrifyingly like Alice — and soon there were new panicky voices nearby. His sense of helplessness was absolute.

At last he did hear Alice speak... but only a single word: "Caroline..."

There was nothing more. Alice's life leaked away onto the floor of the car. By the time the ambulance arrived, the wife that Michael adored was dead.

And Caroline was motherless. The only small comfort for Michael was that he had no need to explain to his little girl how she would never see her mother again — how she must learn to live without a mother. Caroline seemed unaware of the loss. She gave no sign then or later that she missed her mother at all.

Michael's final patient left. He exchanged a few last notes with his dental assistant, wished her a nice weekend and saw her out. Locking the surgery, he made his way to the floor above.

Ten years had passed, but even now he found himself regretting that call to his wife's mobile phone. If she'd been concentrating on the road ahead, she probably could have avoided the collision. If he'd not misplaced his address book, he wouldn't have needed to call her. If the nanny hadn't come down with a stomach virus, he wouldn't have needed his address book. And so on... He knew how pointless it all was. The 'ifs' continued to infinity.

He'd done his best to honour Alice's final implied request. He'd taken care of their daughter. Crucially, the same middle-aged nanny whose stomach bug had indirectly precipitated the tragedy agreed to stay on, providing a continuity of daycare for Caroline. Over the years, Nanny became as devoted to the strange little girl as Michael was himself. And Caroline's mother was still able to make a posthumous contribution. Ever mindful of contingencies, she'd invested in a substantial life insurance. This provided the funds to make her daughter's future as comfortable and fulfilling as possible.

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Attempts to educate Caroline at a school for special-needs children failed. She was consistently inconsolable in the strange new environment and, in her own passive way, wholly uncooperative. The solution was to hire a private qualified home tutor who visited on a regular three-day-a-week basis. Academic advancement was unrealistic in the face of Caroline's communication barrier. But, in time, she learned to take care of everyday needs: to dress and feed herself, to visit the toilet alone, to clean her teeth and go to bed when she was tired. Her sleeping habits were regular and predictable. By the time she was eight, she would retire almost unfailingly at 8.45 pm, even though she had no apparent knowledge of how to read a clock face. She would then arise at 7.15 am, dress and come downstairs for breakfast. This regularity was a blessing for her father.

However, much sooner than that — within a year of her mother's death — Caroline had made a very important discovery: the family piano. The little girl's interest in music had earlier been as a listener, although she did sometimes sing to herself — especially in bed in the evenings as a technique for relaxing into sleep. Her mother had once performed this service. Caroline seemed to have taken the role over for herself.

The piano in the corner of the living room was a baby grand. It had been Alice Lawtham's when she was herself a girl. Seven years of piano lessons had achieved commendable though nowhere near professional skills. A project of Alice's, planned for when her saleswoman days were over, was to revive her playing skills in the hope of bridging some of the gulf between herself and her music-loving daughter. Her instincts in this matter might well have paid off. Neither of her parents at her childhood home in Norwich had any use for a piano, so arrangements were made to transport the instrument to Bristol. In the event, the instrument arrived the day after Alice's fatal accident. For months it stood unopened, untuned and unregarded in the corner of the living room, exactly where the removal men had left it.

Caroline's nanny regularly vacuumed the carpets and dusted surfaces around the house that needed attention, even though such

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chores were not part of her official duties. One day, soon after Caroline's fourth birthday, Nanny raised the piano fallboard to give the keys a cursory and probably unnecessary tickle with a feather duster. Distracted by the phone ringing, she left the lid open. Some ten minutes later, an exploratory tinkling sound came from the living room. Caroline had found the keyboard. Henceforth the piano was left open, a stool of suitable height was placed in front of it, and a piano tuner would visit every four months to maintain the instrument.

Throughout childhood Caroline resisted well-meaning attempts to provide her with professional piano instruction. Even experienced music teachers aware of special-needs techniques were defeated. Whenever Caroline sensed a new teacher had arrived to 'interfere' with her playing, she would go upstairs to her room. There she would stay until the offending person had left the house. Caroline grew up entirely self-taught.

Michael couldn't exactly remember when he began calling his daughter 'Alice'. At first he'd only referred to her in his own thoughts as 'my little Alice' because of her extraordinary facial resemblance to his dead wife. Before long he was saying it aloud. And, in time, the qualifying 'little' was omitted. Caroline became the new Alice. Alice in Wonderland, Michael often thought. And this transformation was accelerated by how she responded so readily to the substitute name. Calling 'Alice' to the dinner table was much likelier to get the desired result than calling for 'Caroline'. The pragmatic Nanny soon adopted the replacement name. Before long, everyone else who came in contact with the former Caroline had followed suit.

The door bell rang at the expected 7 o'clock. Michael went to greet the visitors. On the doorstep he found a woman in her late twenties, tall and willowy with striking, pure white hair cropped very close to her head. This was not at all what he'd expected. She could have stepped out of one of the fashion magazines he left in the waiting room for his lady patients. The man accompanying her was also slim, but even taller. Michael thought it a little

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incongruous that the man's dark hair was much longer than his companion's.

"We've come to meet Caroline Lawtham," the woman smiled. "I'm Pandora Bell. This is Ronald Chatterton. He's a music specialist."

Michael led them through the hallway into a large room at the back of the house.

"We call this the music room," he said.

A woman of about seventy rose from the sofa. Michael Lawtham turned on his heel beside her.

"Let me introduce my aunt, Mrs Winifred Royburn," he said.

"Michael, don't be so formal! It's Freddie, for heaven's sake!"

"Of course. Sorry, Auntie. Aunt Freddie lives with us," he explained.

In fact, Freddie had moved from Worcester into the third of the four bedrooms just three months earlier, having more or less invited herself.

"You can't go on living here alone with the girl," she'd said, in her usual brusque and matter-of-fact tones. "She's turning into a lovely young woman."

Michael didn't see what that had to do with anything, but he was glad to have a second adult in the household on a more or less 24-hour basis. Nanny had been wonderful, but she did have a home as well as a husband of her own to attend to. Except in emergencies, Nanny was only available during Michael's working hours.

"And this must be Caroline," said Pandora, smiling towards a girl standing beside one of the bay windows.

"Caroline's what it says on her birth certificate," Michael explained. "But we call her Alice. She seems to prefer it."

"Right, and I'm Pan," she said to the girl, though making no move in her direction. "This is my friend, Ron. He's a pianist like you."

Alice ignored them. She continued to stare out of the window as the evening sunlight glittered through the leaves of the horse chestnut tree.

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* * *

Ronald Chatterton was interested in architecture — especially local architecture. Walking up the gravelled drive with Pandora, he had given the house his habitual once-over.

Late nineteenth century, Ronald guessed. Or early twentieth. It was built of the local rust-coloured sandstone with the window surrounds, copings, footings, and other decorative dressings in a pale-yellowish limestone. The corners of the building were quoined, giving a vertical castellated effect characteristic of Bristol's Redland and Clifton architecture. The house had three floors plus at least one attic room visible from the road side. The ground floor, which appeared to be a dentist's surgery, was half set below ground level at the front with descending stairs for access. Since the ground sloped away along the side of the house, Ron supposed this lowest floor would open directly onto the back garden.

It was a corner plot with a quiet residential street running along the front and a short cul-de-sac on the right-hand side. A large horse chestnut tree on the side street spread its lush, leafy branches across the back of the house.

Ron and Pandora climbed several limestone steps to the imposing porch at first-floor level and Pandora rang the bell.

The door was answered by a man in early middle age. His features were unremarkable, except Ron thought his swarthy complexion suggested something Southern European; and, although greying a little, his hair mostly retained its original dark colouring. He was casually dressed: a baggy yellow cardigan buttoned loosely over a plaid shirt, with lightweight trousers above tartan bedroom slippers. He introduced himself as Michael Lawtham. His manner was shy, though sociable.

He led them through to the back of the house and into what he called 'the music room'. This was a spacious, high-ceilinged affair with light from two large bay windows on the left. The floor was oak parquet warmed by a few scattered oriental rugs. Uncluttered with bric-a-brac, the space was sparsely but comfortably

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furnished. Immediately to the right of the door stood a baby grand piano, its snub-nosed wing tucked into the corner.

From the sofa rose a woman Ron supposed to be in her early seventies, grey-haired and slim — not tall, but with an air of comfortable dignity; tidily dressed without dowdiness, in a skirt and patterned blouse of rich, warm colours. Lawtham introduced her as his aunt, Mrs Winifred Royburn.

"It's Freddie, for heaven's sake!" she chastised him, with a good-natured smile.

Ron at once sensed the nature of their relationship: the benevolent autocratic female and the deferential obliging male.

A girl wearing blue jeans and a yellow T-shirt stood silently by one of the bay windows. She'd glanced briefly in their direction as they entered the room, but almost immediately turned away again to stare across the garden. Pandora smiled and addressed the girl's back. "This must be Caroline," she said.

"We call her Alice," Lawtham explained. "She seems to prefer it."

Pandora made no move towards the girl. She'd told Ron how one should avoid imposing on an autistic's personal space — at least, to begin with. It could drive them further from you.

She introduced Ron as her friend, adding: "He's a pianist like you. And I've brought you a little present. It's a CD with excerpts from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*. I hope you haven't already got it."

On the car journey to Redland, Pandora had asked Ron if he approved of her choice. *Certainly*, he'd replied. *One of your favourites, is it?* Pandora admitted she didn't know the opera at all — that she'd bought the CD because she liked the cover.

Alice gave no sign of having noticed either of them, so Pandora placed the gift on the coffee table and, at Michael Lawtham's invitation, settled herself in one of the armchairs. The host and his aunt sat opposite her on the sofa.

"I don't think Alice has any opera music at all," Aunt Freddie said. "At least, I've never heard her listen to or play any *I* could recognize."

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"And there's no point asking me," Michael said. "I'm a total Philistine. Alice's personal tutor always chooses the CDs."

"She does seem rather narrow in her tastes," said Aunt Freddie, a trifle sternly. "Nothing but classical. And nearly all for piano or orchestra. I don't see any reason why Alice shouldn't be exposed to every kind of music. A little pop or rock might do her good. After all, she is a teenager."

"Yes, of course, Auntie. And now that *you're* living with us..." Michael said, smiling... and left it at that.

Ron was feeling too restless to sit down with the others. Noticing a large framed photographic portrait of an attractive woman hanging on the wall above the piano, he drifted across for a closer look. He'd only caught a brief glimpse of Alice's face, but there seemed to be a resemblance to the woman in the portrait... except this woman was fair-haired, not dark.

"Is this Alice's mother?" he asked.

"Yes," Michael replied politely. "She died when Alice was three."

"Ah," said Ron simply, feeling enough time had passed to make expressions of condolence inappropriate. He turned from the photograph and stepped round to the front of the baby grand to inspect its walnut casing and check the manufacturer's name. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"Do you think Alice would mind if I tried out her piano?" he asked.

Michael Lawtham shrugged. "Difficult to say. Go ahead if you like..."

Ron lowered himself onto the piano stool. It was the wrong height for his more than six-foot frame, but he didn't want to disturb Alice's adjustment. He turned towards the girl at the window.

"This is one of the songs from your new Mozart CD," he said, and with playful panache began the instrumental opening of Guglielmo's aria *Non siate ritrosi, occhietti vezzosi*.

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The other adults watched and listened in surprise, especially when Ron broke into song in the original Italian with a pleasing and accomplished baritone voice:

*Don't be shy, pretty little eyes
Send this way two flashing glances...*

Alice's eyes did, in fact, turn towards the piano; but they focused on the hands moving across the keyboard rather than the player who owned them.

When Ron brought the short aria to a close with a two-bar improvised piano flourish of his own, the adults clapped and complimented him.

Alice walked out of the room.

"She'll go upstairs to her bedroom," Michael said. "She probably thinks you're a piano teacher." He told them the history of his daughter's failed piano lessons.

"Can she read music?" Ron asked.

"She's never learnt. As I said, completely self-taught. She's refused to have it any other way."

Pandora asked about Alice's health and general behaviour. Ron at last joined the others and settled in the second armchair. He realized that, since he'd driven the girl away, everyone felt at liberty to talk more openly about her.

Soon Aunt Freddie left the room, returning promptly with a pot of tea, teacups and saucers on a tray. She laid everything out on the low table.

"Does Alice have any repetitive mannerisms or gestures?" Pandora was asking.

Michael thought for a moment. "She did when she was younger. She'd rotate her hands round and round in front of her face — all the fingers splayed out. And sometimes she'd stand on tiptoe and rock back and forth from one foot to the other. She could keep that up for an hour at a time... But I think the piano channels most of her physical energy nowadays. If she's feeling restless, she just sits down and plays. As much as five or six hours a day. And the rest of the time... well, she listens to cassettes and

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CDs up in her room. Except she likes to stand over there by the window and look out at the garden. It's one of her favourite spots."

"Does she watch television?" Ron asked.

"It's strange, but Alice has never liked TV. We used to have one in this room years ago. But as soon as she was old enough to switch it off by herself, that's exactly what she did. Whenever we put it on, she'd come and switch it off again — right from when she was two and a half. Now and then, over the years, I've tried putting it on again... just to see what would happen. She simply won't allow it. Nobody knows why."

"Perhaps she's got more sense than the rest of us," Ron said.

"That could be it," nodded Michael. "I moved the living room TV into my own room upstairs. Sometimes I watch it in the evenings, after she's gone to bed."

"How about the radio?" Ron pressed further. "I'm wondering where Alice gets to hear her music."

"Suppose it's just from her own CDs and cassettes. We have a radio on in the kitchen sometimes, if one of us is cooking. But Alice doesn't go in there much. We carry all our meals into the dining room — even our breakfast. Alice obviously likes it that way. It's what we've always done."

"And does she take any part in the domestic routine?" asked Pandora. "How much does she look after herself?"

"In some ways she's learnt to be independent — within the home, I mean. Her tutor's worked hard on that kind of thing. Alice takes care of her own dressing. She washes herself, cleans her teeth, and so on. But she doesn't do any cooking. Nothing that complicated. Recently she's taken to laying the table at mealtimes. For some reason she puts the knives and forks the wrong way round. We tried swapping them over to show her the proper way. She just changed them back again. So we don't bother any more."

Aunt Freddie began pouring out the tea. She glanced up momentarily at Pandora...

"So, my dear, you'd like to do some research on our Alice. I'm afraid Michael's a bit old-fashioned about these things." She turned her attention back to the tea pot. "He's always been against

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letting anyone not absolutely essential into the home. He says it wouldn't be fair on Alice. Don't you, Michael? But I've persuaded him it can't do any harm. Just the opposite really! The more we know about autism, the more we can help Alice and others like her."

Pandora nodded appreciatively and explained how she was hoping to observe Alice's daily life — perhaps study her playing skills in a more scientific manner.

"I've asked Ronald to help me with the music angle," she explained.

"Michael's usually down in the surgery during the day," Aunt Freddie said. "So it's better if you work out a schedule with me. Something regular and predictable... for Alice's benefit. We do try to stick to a rigid routine here — meal times, tuition, and so on. She seems happier if we do."

"Of course," Pandora agreed. "And something that would be extremely helpful... Could I see the existing psychologists' reports? Whatever's been written about Alice over the years? It could save a lot of time — not having to duplicate everyone else's work."

Michael promised to arrange the matter.

Ten minutes later, Alice re-entered the room. She picked up the CD that Pandora had left on the coffee table and carried it across to her favoured place beside the window. There she studied the cover design. But, before long, she was staring out of the window again, holding the CD in both hands.

Pandora redirected the conversation. She now made polite conversation with Michael about his dental practice and with Freddie about the garden.

Ron took this chance to observe Alice. He knew she was thirteen years old. Not as advanced into puberty as many of her age, but already filling out into a semblance of womanly proportions; lightly built, lots of attractive dark hair falling about fragile, girlish shoulders. Nothing in her appearance indicated her autistic condition. She seemed much like any other young teenage girl in jeans and T-shirt; although her face, Ron had noticed as she

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walked past, *was* unusual in its sweetness. He found himself comparing Alice's soft, delicate features to those of a Renaissance Madonna.

When Ron and Freddie had finished their second cup of tea, Pandora thanked Michael and his aunt for their hospitality and stood up to cue the end of the visit. The four adults made their way into the hall and continued to talk while the visitors retrieved their jackets.

Suddenly, in the music room, the piano broke into an elegant and jaunty melody.

Ron realized at once what was happening. He stepped rapidly back to the doorway and watched with a tingle of superstitious awe prickling the back of his neck. The other three joined him, in piecemeal fashion, peering past at the girl now seated before the piano. To begin with, the non-musicians probably missed the point. But when Alice started to sing in an imperfect, uncanny imitation of Italian, even they must have understood. This was the very same aria Ron had performed for them thirty minutes earlier.

Ron was asking himself, *Could Alice, after all, have known the piece beforehand?* But already he doubted it. And when she concluded the aria with the identical pair of throwaway bars he'd himself improvised on the spot, he knew for sure: Alice Lawtham had just reproduced the whole piece with almost perfect accuracy — melodic, contrapuntal and harmonic — after only a single hearing.

Variation II

Ron continued to rerun the experience in his head. Nothing he'd read about musical savants could have prepared him for this firsthand encounter. And it wasn't just *what* Alice had played. It was *how* she'd played. He'd never seen anything like it. For most traditional piano teachers it would have been the stuff of nightmares...

First there was Alice's posture: Her back was rarely straight. She frequently reeled and twisted from side to side. Sometimes she crouched forward over the keyboard with hunched shoulders. He'd even seen her resting her forehead for several seconds against the front of the wooden casing.

And her wrists were in perpetual vertical motion: they could drop so low she seemed to be hanging onto the front of the keyboard, as if from the edge of a cliff; at other times they rose so high that the only way she could touch the keys was with a downward jabbing motion.

The amazing thing was how well it worked!

After the Mozart aria, which Alice had simultaneously sung in her strange, haunting version of Italian, Ron and Pandora stayed to watch in fascination as she played Chopin's famous Nocturne in F Minor and then the Allemande, *La Ténébreuse*, by the baroque composer, François Couperin. It was in these purely instrumental pieces that Alice's extraordinary variety of technical strategies

Variation II

became apparent. There were, for example, passages where she avoided using her thumbs altogether. Ron found this historically intriguing. He knew that prior to Johann Sebastian Bach's time, players of keyboard instruments — the organ, harpsichord and clavichord — had often used only the four fingers of each hand. The thumbs were left inactive, being considered too short to reach the keys — especially the black ones. Since Alice was self-taught, she must have discovered this manner of execution quite independently; although Ron doubted the tradition in baroque times was to casually slide both thumbs along the vertical edge of the woodwork in front of the keyboard as Alice sometimes had.

"Was that real Italian she was singing?" Pandora asked, as they headed towards Totterdown in Ron's VW Golf.

"No Italian I've ever heard," Ron replied. "She seemed to be imitating the words of the aria as pure vocal sounds... although nowhere near as accurately as she reproduced the piano part. I doubt whether an Italian would've made much sense of her lyrics. But musically there weren't many deviations from the original Mozart. And the differences she made weren't exactly 'mistakes'... I mean, they still made musical sense. They just weren't what Mozart himself chose to do at those moments."

"What's your professional opinion of her playing?"

"Stunning! Extremely idiosyncratic... A bit uneven in tone and dynamics. But very convincing. Loads of enthusiasm. Emotive. Thoroughly musical. I mean the gritty way she played those dark Couperin ornaments. And her face! Did you see her face?"

"I was watching her face more than her hands."

"It was all there! You could read everything from her facial expressions. The melancholy, the sombre gravity, the occasional flashes of ecstasy... even the irony of the Mozart piece. Am I glad you brought me along! I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

"Do you think we should record her playing? Get some musical material for you to work on?"

"Of course. But I can think of a better way than with a microphone. We could MIDI up her piano and record her

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performances as pure data. Much easier to handle analytically — or even statistically, if we'd like to later on."

"Sorry, you've lost me. 'MIDI up'? What's that?"

"Tricky to explain cruising down Park Street. What about if I show you? We could drop in at my place. Right now, if you like! I've got a MIDI setup with my own piano. I can give you a demonstration... and then drive you home afterwards."

Pandora didn't hesitate long before agreeing to this proposal.

Ron lived in a small terraced house in Bedminster on a rather seedy-looking back street. But he was proud of what he'd achieved beyond his green-painted front door. So he found Pandora's surprised response gratifying when she saw the freshly decorated interior.

"You've made this really cosy," she said. "Different from any of the male bachelor middens I've had the misfortune to visit earlier. Tasteful too."

Ron gave Pandora a guided tour, even taking her upstairs for a glimpse into the master bedroom. But the study-come-music room downstairs with its single window looking directly onto the street pavement was where he left Pandora while he went to operate the cafetiere in the kitchen. On his return with two full, aromatic mugs, he found her studying his enormous collection of CDs and books that covered the full height and length of one wall.

"Have you really listened to all this music?" she asked.

"Probably. Can't guarantee I've read all the books, though."

He sat at the piano, which was backed against the wall opposite the shelves, then reached out to place his coffee on a desk a few feet to the left.

"Coffee and electronics don't mix," he said. "I've learned to keep them apart — from bitter inexperience."

"But *this* isn't an electronic piano, is it?"

"No, it's just your common or garden upright. A grand would've been nice, but there isn't room in this house. Maybe later, when I get my Victorian mansion overlooking the Avon Gorge."

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Pandora smiled. "Okay, but aren't you supposed to be explaining this MIDI thing to me?"

"Take a seat," Ron said, and stretched again towards the desk to drag a castored five-legged chair up close to his piano stool. Pandora sat down and turned to him with an amused okay-then-teacher-teach-me look as she squirmed her bottom into a comfortable position.

To their right was a table set at right angles to the piano keyboard. It was dominated by a large flat-screen monitor bearing the Macintosh bitten-apple logo, and several hi-tech black boxes were stacked on either side. In front of the screen was a standard 'QWERTY' keyboard and a mouse. Beneath the table at ground level stood a large pillared computer. Ron bent down and switched it on.

"While the computer's booting up," Ron began, "I'll fill in a bit of background. What we call MIDI was invented back in the early 1980s. It stands for Musical Instrument Digital Interface. But that's not important. All you need to know is it's a kind of language that electronic musical instruments — synthesizers, drum machines, samplers, and so on — use to communicate with each other and with the computers we link them up to. I said my piano wasn't electronic, but this device *here* is." He touched a thin bar of dark plastic, about three inches high, that rested at the back of the piano keys flush against the fallboard. It spanned the full width of the piano and stood on small legs to the left and right of the keys. A few tiny lights were lit up on the front of the plastic bar.

"This device is called a Moog PianoBar," he said, not pronouncing Moog like 'moon', but rhyming it with 'vogue'. "What the PianoBar does is watch the piano keys underneath with little infrared sensors — one sensor for each of the 88 keys. When a key is played and moves down, the PianoBar spots it and instantly sends a couple of MIDI-language messages to my computer. The messages are very simple. They tell which of the keys has been pressed and how long it took the key to reach the bottom of its travel. Later on, another message will be sent when the key is released by the finger and it rises back to its normal position.

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Okay? So that's three messages to the computer: which key has gone down, how fast it moved and when it came back up again. These three correspond to the *beginning* of a specific note or pitch, how *loudly* the note was played, and when it *ended*... You with me so far?"

Pandora nodded. "Think so," she said, and took a tentative sip of coffee, watching him over the top of her mug. She had eyes of an unusual ice blue, with extraordinarily large irises, and they emanated intelligence. Ron liked Pandora's eyes. He liked them a lot. But she wasn't here for him to admire her eyes.

"Let's suppose," he continued, "that somebody sits at the piano and starts playing. The PianoBar monitors all of the key movements the player makes and sends MIDI messages about each of them to the computer. The computer acts as a sort of recording machine. It runs its electronic clock from the beginning of the piece and keeps a record in its memory of the exact times when each key moves down and up, and also the speed of every down stroke."

"And you said the speed of the key shows the loudness of the note?"

"Yes, when you hit a piano key harder, you're actually hitting it faster. The key moves down with greater momentum and throws the hammer faster at the string. That's how you get a louder sound out of the instrument."

Ron reached round Pandora to retrieve his coffee. He took a long draught and returned it by the same route. Both times his arm brushed against her shoulders. He expected her to flinch or lean forward... She did neither.

"Time to show you in practice," Ron said. He operated the mouse on the table to his right and opened a program on the computer screen. It displayed several complex-looking windows with tables, graphs and also one small set of images representing the controls of a tape recorder. "This program's called a 'sequencer' because it remembers the sequence of MIDI messages sent to it from the keyboard."

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Ron pressed the onscreen 'RECORD' button and the computer made a clicking sound like a metronome. Ron edged forward on his stool and began playing a Bach prelude in time with the click. Twenty seconds later he broke off in mid-phrase.

"What the computer's just done is it's memorized all of the key movements I made while I was playing. If we want, we can send that same data sequence to a synthesizer. The synthesizer will be able to follow the data and replay the music exactly. It'll behave as if its own keyboard's being played... although you won't see any of its keys moving. Its interpreting the MIDI messages directly with its electronic circuits and bypassing the mechanics of the keyboard altogether. Listen..."

Ron fiddled around with the mouse again, adjusting various parameters on the computer screen. Soon he moved the cursor over the graphics 'PLAY' button and clicked the mouse. The sound of a piano came at once from two loudspeakers attached to the wall above the piano. The music was the same he'd played himself a minute earlier, although his hands were now resting inert on his lap.

Ron watched Pandora's reaction.

"I'm not sure I'm getting this," she said. "What's the difference between this computer 'sequencing', as you call it, and an ordinary tape or CD recording?"

"On a tape or CD you've recorded the actual *sound* produced when the music's performed — a sort of representation of the sound waves themselves... A computer sequencer doesn't record sound at all. It only remembers the movements of the keyboard that the music was played on. What you've just heard through the loud speakers isn't a direct recording of my piano. It's a new 'live' performance played by a synthesizer that's following instructions from my computer. It's copying my original performance exactly. But now it's using its own built-in electronic imitation of a Steinway piano to create the sound from scratch."

"You mean that wasn't a real piano we just heard? It sounded like one."

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"Modern electronics give a good imitation of the real thing... Anyway what's important to understand: the computer's 'sequencer' is so accurate at remembering the timing and the loudness of every note I played earlier that, in terms of expressive nuance and interpretation, the human brain has trouble distinguishing the repeat performance on the synthesizer from my original one on the piano. To all intents and purposes the original and the imitation are identical."

Ron gave Pandora time to absorb everything he'd told her. He reclaimed his coffee mug, and they sat in comfortable silence for a while.

At last Pandora sat up straighter. "What you're proposing, then," she said, "is we rig up a system like this on Alice's piano and record all of the key movements she makes as she's playing."

"Exactly. We store everything she does on a laptop computer — I've got an old one somewhere I can resurrect for the job. The MIDI sequencer will only record when Alice actually *plays* something. That's a massive advantage over a traditional tape recorder. We'd have to leave a tape recorder running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for fear of missing something. That's wasteful, if not downright impractical! But, although the computer sequencer's listening all the time for something to happen, it only stores what's important — only the notes that Alice actually plays. Every few days I can visit the Lawthams and copy the new data onto a memory stick, bring it back here, and then we can study everything at our leisure. For example, we could focus on her timing, or her phrasing, her dynamics, her accuracy of execution — anything we want. We can even do statistical analyses with the MIDI data. Much easier than messing around with real sounds — I mean with all those complex, difficult-to-read wave forms. Sometimes, of course, we'll want to *listen* to her performances as well. Then I can play them back from the MIDI files with my imitation Steinway and burn CD copies that can be used on any CD player."

"It sounds amazing," Pandora said. "But where do we get hold of a Moog PianoBar? Are they expensive?"

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"Way beyond your research budget, I imagine — if it's anything like the paltry ones they dish out at the Music Department. But don't worry. We can use *my* PianoBar. I'm sure I can live without it for a while."

As promised, Ron afterwards delivered Pandora home to Totterdown. And, like last time, after Moira and Greg's party, he got out in a chivalrous manner to escort her the final few yards. At her doorstep, enthusing — also like last time — about Vale Street and its extraordinary steepness, he noticed Pandora frowning.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm just wondering how Alice will react to your tampering with her piano. Most autistics are extremely resistant to changes in their routine or their surroundings. She could make things quite difficult for you."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe she will... But let's see. Could be I'll find some way to win her over." And with an optimistic grin, he strolled back to his car.

It was four days later when Ron had the opportunity to find out whether his plan for MIDI-ing up Alice's piano would work.

He'd explained the idea to Michael Lawtham over the phone. Ron doubted that Michael really understood what was involved, but he'd anyway agreed to let Ron give the PianoBar a try.

Ron showed up at the Lawtham house a little before 6 o'clock on Tuesday evening. Michael had suggested taking advantage of when the family would be dining at the other end of the house. Ron carried his equipment into the music room, with the scanner bar under one arm and various other items in a sports bag hooked over the opposite shoulder. There he surveyed the piano he was about to adapt into a MIDI controller. It was an easy job and it shouldn't take long.

The sports bag with its laptop computer and other sensitive devices Ron placed gently on the carpet, leaving him free to manipulate the long scanner bar with both hands. He lifted it up to the front of the piano and positioned it carefully over the keyboard with its ends resting on the cheek blocks at either side. He eased

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the PianoBar back against the piano's fallboard and lined up the scanner's green centre mark with the left edge of the middle C key. Then he adjusted the levelling clamps at either end of the bar to position it at exactly the correct height above the keys.

Digging in his bag, he drew out a separate, much shorter infrared sensor and placed it on the floor underneath the pedals of the piano. Ron hadn't bothered to explain this part of the Moog device to Pandora, but its job would be to read the movements of the soft and damper pedals and send this additional information to the computer sequencer.

Next he connected both sensor components by slim black cables to a small control box, which he set on the floor beneath the piano, plugging it into a nearby electrical wall socket. Normally the control box would sit on top of the piano. Ron preferred to keep everything possible out of sight. The less upset to Alice's sense of domestic continuity, the better.

So the three PianoBar components were in position. Now he needed to calibrate the electronics to the workings of Alice's baby grand by pressing all eighty-eight keys of the piano in turn, taking care to hold each one down for a moment before releasing it. The infrared sensors watched and automatically registered the depth of travel for each key. The PianoBar would now know how to read the key movements correctly.

The whole set-up operation had taken Ron less than five minutes. He still needed to link up the laptop computer which would record the piano's key movements... but suddenly Alice was there in the room. She must have heard something from the dinner table and come to investigate. Ron could see her staring suspiciously at the alien black bar spanning the piano's keyboard. To distract her, he began playing the same Chopin Nocturne he'd heard her perform the previous Friday.

At first his tactics seemed to be working. But when he looked back to where Alice stood a few feet from his shoulder, she'd raised herself on tiptoe and was rocking agitatedly from side to side. And now she began a strange moaning sound, deep in her

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throat — not loud, but disturbingly animal — as if her soul were trying to break to the surface in sheer anxiety.

Ron was at a loss. The last thing he'd wanted was to upset her. As he played the Chopin, his mind thrashed about for a way to defuse the situation. Alice's distress was increasing by the second. To make matters worse, Michael had appeared in the doorway, his look of concern transforming into accusation as he turned in Ron's direction.

What was Ron to do? Should he abandon the idea? Should he remove the scanner bar and leave the house and let Alice get over her anguish? Would she ever allow him into her music room again? Or, for that matter, would her father? Did this mean the end of his involvement in Pandora's project?

As a last ditch attempt to capture Alice's interest, he continued playing with his right hand while reaching under the piano with his left to make an adjustment on the PianoBar's control box. When he sat up again, tiny coloured lights were flashing along the front of the scanner bar: green lights above the diatonic keys and red lights above the chromatic ones. As he played, they blinked on and off in synchronisation with the key movements — a fairy-light display in time with and reflecting the upward and downward shaping of the music. Their purpose was educational, a device to help young pianists learn their way across the keyboard. Now they showed their value in another way...

Alice stopped moaning. Ron didn't dare look over his shoulder for fear of triggering the noise again. As he played, he waited in suspense.

Soon he sensed that Alice had drawn closer and risked a glance in her direction. She was no longer rocking on her toes. She was staring at the lights that depicted the music. Michael, meanwhile, had stopped halfway across the room.

Ron played the Chopin piece through to the end. In the ensuing silence Alice continued to stare at the now unlit scanner bar.

Easing himself from the piano stool, Ron edged over against the wall to leave the place free for Alice. She slid at once into the seat and reached out to play a single note. The corresponding light

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blinked on above the key. She released the key and the light was extinguished. She tried several more keys; afterwards a whole chord, watching as the lights responded to her touch.

Without warning, she burst into a ferocious Bach fugue.

Ron knew the piece well. It was from the so-called "48" Preludes and Fugues. But never had he heard it played with such vehemence and at such high speed. It was as if Alice were releasing the tension and anxiety of those earlier moments. And throughout, she watched the lights flashing furiously and synchronously on the PianoBar.

Something that thrilled Ron even more than this extraordinary performance of a classic piece of Bach repertoire was to watch the smile of pleasure that now suffused and transformed Alice's face.

* * *

"Have you got it?" Pandora asked.

"Hang on a mo." It was 4.30 pm on Thursday, and Ron had just arrived at the University canteen. He didn't sit down at Pandora's table. Instead he was digging around in his briefcase. "Only fetched the MIDI files from Redland two hours ago. Barely been time to burn your CD. Has to be done in 'real time', you see. Haven't heard any of it myself yet. The fridge was empty. So I went shopping as the sequencer was running... Ah, here it is. Beginning to think I'd left the thing at home." He handed Pandora a slim CD case. "Almost eighty minutes' worth. Sorry, didn't have time to label it."

"You seem a bit rushed," she said.

"One of my colleagues... his accompanist's come down with flu. High temperature. No way she can play this evening. I offered to step in."

"A concert?"

"Beethoven and Franck violin sonatas. But it's down in Bridgewater and we're on at 7.30. He's picking me up outside in five minutes. Barely time to tune up and check the acoustics when we get there. A full rehearsal's out of the question. Hopefully our

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interpretations won't be too far off. We'll simply have to wing it. Hang on, I'll grab a coffee. Be right back."

As Ron darted off to the counter, Pandora saw Moira and Greg entering on the far side of the room. They'd spotted her too and were heading in her direction. With them was a third person, and Pandora suddenly realized who this bearded, middle-aged man was. Several other heads around the room were turning in similar recognition.

"Hi, Pan," said Moira. "Let me introduce our tame celebrity... Sir David Powys Hughes."

"Less of the 'Sir', if you don't mind," said the familiar voice that Pandora had heard on radio and television. "Stick to plain David, shall we?"

"Don't get touchy," laughed Moira. "You shouldn't have knelt before the queen if you didn't want the titular prefix."

"And less of the 'titular'. I can see we're in a better class of company now... except you haven't finished introducing us."

"Keep your bowtie on. This young lady 'ere is my most intelligent and most beautiful colleague, Doctor Pandora Bell."

"Less of the 'Doctor', if you don't mind?" Pandora smiled. "And a bit more of the 'intelligent' and 'beautiful'."

"Suppose the 'young's' not a problem, is it?" purred Moira softly.

Sir David reached down to shake hands. Pandora only just restrained herself from standing up. He wasn't royalty, for heaven's sake!

"Most people call me Pan," she said automatically.

"Pan it is then. Mind if we join you? Or are you expecting someone?"

"Help yourselves," Pandora said, forgetting until it was too late that Ron would be back with his coffee and there were only four chairs round the table. Sir David took the one to her left.

"Another psychologist, eh?" he said. "Always been drawn to psychologists. Fallen in love with three of my shrinks so far."

"Better warn you. I'm no shrink. I'm a research psychologist. Very different creature."

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"Pity," said Sir David, "though I'm sure research can be fascinating. What are you delving into at present?"

Pandora suspected he was making fun of her. But there seemed no malice in it. Just his bantering style she supposed.

"Autism and Asperger Syndrome."

"Ah," said Sir David, immediately less flippant. "My cousin has an Asperger boy. Charming young man in his own way. But you have to avoid saying anything ironic or metaphoric. He takes everything so literally."

"They generally do."

By now, Moira and Greg were occupying the other two seats.

"Viola joke for you, David," said Greg. "What's the similarity between lightning and a viola player's fingers?"

"Decades old," scoffed Sir David. "They never strike the same place twice. So what's the difference between a coffin and a viola?"

"The corpse is on the inside of the coffin," Ronald cut in, having returned with a large frothy cappuccino. He was hovering at Moira's shoulder.

"Ron!" exclaimed Greg. "Grab a chair from somewhere."

"Better not. Taking my caffeine on the fly. Off to a gig."

"Okay, but have you met David Powys Hughes?"

Sir David rose to shake hands.

"Ronald Chatterton," Greg explained. "Music department, piano and theory."

"Delighted to meet you, Ronald."

"What brings you to our fair-hilled city?" Ron asked the famed conductor.

"A series of workshops with your local youth orchestras."

"Pro bono," Greg chipped in.

"No need to emphasize that," said Sir David. "Enormous fun. I probably get more out of it than the youngsters. Had plenty of help in my early days. My turn to give some back."

Ron swilled his coffee down in a couple of gulps, brushed the foam from his top lip, and with a quick apology headed off for his recital.

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Greg gave him a wave and turned back to tell Pandora how Sir David had been his conducting mentor at Birmingham University, and how he'd persuaded the great man to take the train south for a series of weekly youth workshops throughout May and halfway into June.

"Didn't take much persuading," said Sir David.

Pandora had a sense of unreality... Quite hard to take in that this was the real flesh and blood Powys Hughes. She'd heard some of his talks about music on the radio. She'd read numerous articles about him in newspapers and magazines. She'd seen him interviewed on chat shows and conducting Promenade concerts on TV. But Pan had often reflected how, with celebrities, we delude ourselves into thinking we truly know them. The bewitching familiarity of their faces and personalities, their voices and their body language give us the illusion they're a genuine part of our lives. Our sense of tribal identity, built in through a million years of evolution, gets tricked by the modern marvels of radio, TV and film into including them — at least, on a subconscious and emotional level — within our own circle of friends and acquaintances... except that suddenly seeing them for real, confuses us. Having before only experienced them at secondhand, we can't relate to the fact that this is the actual envelope of skin that contains the beating heart and humming brain of the true person — the physical one who's walked this Earth and actually lived every minute of that life which, until now, we've only viewed as distant voyeurs. Yes, Pandora found sitting beside Sir David Powys Hughes in the familiar surroundings of the Bristol Uni canteen a little disorienting.

Twenty minutes later Moira and Greg left to meet Moira's parents in town.

"Mum's birthday," Moira explained. "Taking them for nosh and then a play at the Theatre Royal."

"Lovely woman," said Greg. "Obvious where Moira gets it from. Sometimes wish I'd been born thirty years earlier."

"Watch out, or I'll tell my Dad," Moira said, jabbing him in the ribs with both forefingers. "He's the jealous type. Bigger and

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meaner than you'll ever be. Quite sure you won't join us, David... not even for the meal?"

"Like I said, it's a family do. Don't worry about me. Think I'll stay on here a bit and chat to Pan... that's if she doesn't mind."

Pan indicated she didn't.

"I can find my own way back to the flat," he added. "Key's right here in my pocket."

Moira and Greg nodded and rose from the table, waving a farewell from the far end of the canteen as they left.

"So you're staying at their place?" Pan asked.

"Yes, but they arranged this theatre trip weeks ago. Now the show's sold out. Anyway, I wouldn't want to impose on a family get-together."

Before long Sir David had returned to quizzing Pandora about her autism research. He seemed especially interested in her account of the visit to Alice Lawtham.

"Look, I'm finished for the day," he said suddenly. "How about you? Fancy a quick drink somewhere? On your way to wherever you're going? Don't know much about Bristol pubs. Perhaps you could point me in some useful direction."

'Wherever Pandora was going' happened to be an empty house in Totterdown. Sir David's proposal sounded a good deal more appealing; although she decided there and then to avoid mentioning anything about her current personal problems.

They strolled the three quarters of a mile to Clifton Village where Pandora introduced him to a wine bar that had been one of her and Kurt's frequent venues. She'd debated with herself whether this was a sensible choice... but concluded it was better to exorcise Kurt's ghost from their old haunts as soon as possible. She was damned if she'd let Kurt dictate her future as she'd too often let him dictate her past. And who better to perform this first act of exorcism than a celebrated and notoriously good-looking conductor?

Over two chilled glasses of Chablis, the conversation turned to David's youth workshops.

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"Doesn't the Royal Birmingham Philharmonic complain when you abandon them so many days in the month?" Pandora asked.

"No, it's expected. The contract gives me plenty of scope for other activities. There's a co-conductor sharing the main workload. And they have frequent guest conductors too. One from Italy last week. Delightful fellow. Experienced opera man in his own country. But he doesn't travel abroad that much, so his English is a bit rusty. Have you heard the Italian word for 'bassoon'... It's *fagotto*. Literally means a bundle of sticks, which is pretty much what the forerunner of the bassoon looked like. Anyway, there our Italian was, rehearsing the Brum Phil... and he stops the orchestra and asks if they can take it again from bar 132. *And thees time*, he says, *will all of thee faggots pleez play a leetle louder?*"

Pandora smiled.

"I'm told," Sir David went on, "that the resulting *fortissimo* raised the roof. But unfair to mock. We're damn lucky so many nations are ready to learn our ridiculously illogical language. Take it too much for granted, don't we? Should be ashamed of ourselves."

"Are you a linguist?"

"Survival skills in French and German. My Italian's useless. I can just about manage in front of an orchestra with the standard Italian music terms. Put me on a street in Milan, I'm a lost soul."

"I've been meaning to ask... about these viola jokes Greg's always telling. What's so funny about viola players?"

"Ah, the poor violist. Always the butt of mischievous humour. Accused of being a failed violinist who can scarcely manage what some claim to be the less demanding parts in the middle of the music texture. It's a sort of orchestral equivalent of an 'Irish' joke. Totally unjustified, of course. Except, how do you get ten violinists to play in tune? Shoot nine of 'em. How do you get ten violists to play in tune? Shoot them all."

"Surely other musicians get tasteless jokes made about them?"

"Of course... What's the difference between a soprano and a hostage-taker? You can negotiate with a hostage-taker. And what's

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the difference between a seamstress and an oboist? A seamstress tucks up frills."

David paused to take a sip from his fluted, long-stemmed glass.

"There's a tradition," he went on, "that the great conductor Sir Thomas Beecham said to a cellist in his orchestra: *Madam, you have between your legs something capable of giving pleasure to thousands, yet all you can do is scratch it.* Sorry, a bit over the top. No offence taken, I hope."

Pan brushed off his reservations. She'd undergone a three-and-a-half-year course of desensitization to male-chauvinist humour with Kurt.

"Presumably conductors aren't exempt," she said.

David grinned. "What's the difference between a dead dog in the road and a dead conductor in the road? You'll find skid marks in front of the dog. And what's the difference between a bull and an orchestra? The bull has horns at the front and an arsehole at the back."

This time Pandora burst out laughing. She found herself relaxing in David's company in a way she'd been unable to do since Kurt's sudden departure. David also brought the novelty of a world beyond her personal experience. She'd never thought of herself as a potential 'groupie', but it was impossible to ignore this man's aura — his natural charisma. And, yes, he was good-looking... in fact, even more than one might realize from still photos and grainy TV images.

He wasn't especially tall, although he radiated strength and vigour. His hair, which receded over an impressively high forehead, was trimmed neatly, as were his moustache and beard. In places it was turning grey — especially at the temples and under his lower lip. His eyebrows, still dark brown, were thick and bushy, tilting outwards and upwards at a strong angle from the bridge of his hawk-like nose. This gave him a commanding yet, at the same time, ironically amused expression. His lips were sensually thick, his eyes an intense blue.

Beyond all of this, David had enormous grace, both in his larger movements — Pandora had noticed the way he performed

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simple actions like walking, sitting down and standing up — but also in the smaller elements of body language — his arm and hand gestures, his lively, intelligent use of face. Perhaps this was to be expected of a talented conductor. But there was also his voice: charming, warm and mercurial. Sometimes it took on a gravelly edge that Pandora found rather sexy.

By seven o'clock, they were both getting hungry. At David's instigation they migrated to a Spanish restaurant two streets away. Pandora didn't say so, but this was a second exorcism.

Over the main course, David talked about the new Elgar website he'd set up. He called it myelgar.co.uk and planned to use it as a forum for posting his personal reflections on the great English composer's life and music. At the same time he hoped to encourage other music lovers to join in and voice their own thoughts and opinions.

But it wasn't long before David took the conversation in a more personal direction. His attempts to draw Pandora out about her present relationships were unsuccessful, but that didn't deter him from discussing his own marital misgivings.

"Jamila's ever more in demand," he confided. "Of course, both of us have busy schedules. A lot of travelling involved. But we don't seem to cross paths much these days. Hardly ever see her really. I'm beginning to wonder if it's intentional."

Pandora couldn't avoid thoughts of her own desertion. She heard herself saying: "Not a lot of fun, is it, when your other half loses interest?"

David stared intently at her for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"What I meant was intentional on *both* sides."

"Oh."

Perhaps sensing her discomfort, and therefore as a distraction, David beckoned the waiter over and asked for a second look at the menu.

"This evening," he announced, "I shall indulge in a dessert."

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Pandora agreed to be similarly tempted. After they'd chosen something reprehensible, Sir David made it clear he wasn't ready to change the subject altogether.

"Not sure why I bothered to marry again," he mused. "You'd think I'd've learnt my lesson."

Pandora knew as well as anyone who read the newspapers about David's string of wives.

"Perhaps," he went on, "I'm old-fashioned. I always think one should tie the knot. Maybe I don't feel whole without the social status of being a husband who's got a wife somewhere... if you see what I mean?"

Pandora didn't rise to the bait again. She'd already given away too much by hinting at her recent breakup.

Sir David studied her for another long moment... but then relented, redirecting the conversation himself to musical savants and to Alice Lawtham in particular.

They were just finishing their dessert when Pandora remembered the CD Ron had given her. She dug in her bag and showed it to David.

"Pity I don't have laser vision," he said. "I'd love to hear Alice's playing. Any discos in the neighbourhood? Perhaps we can bribe a DJ to give it a spin."

"There's a good stereo setup at my place," Pandora blurted out, surprising herself.

David hesitated... though not for long. "What are we waiting for? I'll sort the bill, then let's get listening."

Pandora offered to pay her share, but David was adamant.

"My idea, my treat," he said, handing the waiter his credit card before Pandora could protest further.

Within minutes they were outside looking for a taxi.

At eleven the next morning, Pandora was back in the University canteen, occupying the same chair as yesterday. By agreement, Sir David arrived to meet her. As if out of long established habit, he sat again to her left... before beginning to enthuse about their previous evening together.

Variation II

Almost at once Ronald Chatterton appeared.

"Good heavens," he grinned. "Have you two been sitting here since yesterday afternoon?"

"Certainly not," said Sir David. "We've been commendably busy. Pan's given me a tour of Clifton wine bars and restaurants. And she's introduced me to the steepest hill in Bristol."

"Vale Street?" Ron asked uncertainly, sitting opposite Pandora.

"Expect so. And we listened to your extraordinary little Alice's piano pieces over a bottle of Sauvignon."

"At Pandora's place?"

"Absolutely."

Pandora didn't feel comfortable with the way this was going. Ron seemed to be jumping to conclusions she'd prefer him not to.

"Startling talent, your Alice," Sir David continued. "And that third piece on the CD! Amazing, eh? Knocked me right off my perch!"

Ron looked puzzled. "Which piece would that be?"

"Come on. Surely you noticed!"

"Noticed what? All of Alice's pieces are fantastic."

"But the third one... I can't believe you didn't recognize it!"

Ron said nothing.

"Good God, man! Call yourself an Englishman? An English *musician* at that! Elgar's Third for St George and the dragon's sake."

Ronald stared back stonily.

Pandora could see he was annoyed about David's condescending manner. She also sensed a competitive edge to this exchange. Competing over what? Heaven forbid it should be her! Could Ron be jealous? He'd given little indication of interest outside of their autism alliance. Was he piqued she'd let Sir David into her home when she'd twice left *him* on the doorstep? If Ron only knew how close she'd come that first night after the Clifton party — how needy she'd felt, how terrified of being left alone in the house. Inviting him in had seemed an attractive idea. She wasn't sure why she'd let him walk away. Was she suspicious of

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the drinks she'd consumed? Or was she afraid he'd find an excuse to refuse the offer and leave her looking foolish...

Anyway Ron's behaviour now was probably nothing more than his feeling intimidated by David's celebrity.

To her relief, David adopted a less combative tone:

"You see, Ronald, Alice played the first movement of Elgar's Third Symphony. I don't know if you're aware of this, but the composer pretty well only managed to sketch out the exposition section of it before he died. Some years ago, the composer Anthony Payne reconstructed a complete orchestral version of the movement — of the whole symphony, for that matter. It's been recorded more than once. The big question is how Alice came up with the version *she* was playing."

"I've browsed Alice's CD collection," Ron said coolly, still eyeing Sir David with suspicion. "Her aunt showed me yesterday, when I was there to download the MIDI data. The only Elgar works I spotted were the *Enigma Variations*, the first *Pomp and Circumstance*, and *Salut d'Amour*."

"Which makes it even more puzzling," mused Sir David. "Her version of the movement wasn't Tony Payne's reconstruction. I should know. I've conducted it five times myself. Tony incorporated all that's left of Elgar's original material, but everything else — that's about half of the movement — is his own invention. Alice's version uses all of Elgar's stuff too. But in every other way it's quite new — at least, *I've* never heard it before. I have enormous respect for Tony's achievement, but to be honest I found Alice's version even *more* convincing. The development section truly sings. It carries you away. And the coda's magnificent! How on earth did she come up with something like that?"

Ron shrugged. "*Everything* Alice does is amazing," he said. "Perhaps she improvised it."

"But it sounds like pure Elgar. The genuine article. As if Elgar had taught it to her himself."

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"From beyond the grave, you mean?" said Ron, with more than a hint of mockery. "You reckon there's something supernatural going on, do you?"

"I doubt I'd go quite *that* far..." Sir David replied.

But, as Pandora watched his bemused expression, she wondered if Ron's suggestion hadn't somehow triggered this as a fascinating possibility in Sir David's mind.

* * *

When David Powys Hughes had entered the University canteen and located Pan in the same spot as yesterday, she'd beckoned him over...

Hell's bells, she was attractive! He'd always had a thing about tall women, even if he was scarcely more than average height himself. And he sensed he might have a chance with Ms Pandora Bell. She seemed flattered by his attention. What's more he suspected there'd been a recent disappointment in her love life which could play in his favour. As they were entering her Totterdown living room the previous evening, Pandora had snatched a framed photograph off the coffee table and stowed it away in the top drawer of her writing desk — though not before David had glimpsed the portrayal of her standing close and amorous beside a dark, handsome young man with the Clifton Suspension Bridge as backdrop. Whether that relationship was ongoing or defunct David had no way of knowing, but he suspected the latter.

In any case, he'd thoroughly enjoyed his time with her yesterday. They'd listened to the autistic girl's piano pieces, which were amazing, and then talked seriously or sometimes a lot less seriously on a wide range of subjects. Yes, it had been fun. But he'd left her place by taxi not long after midnight, risking no more than a quick peck on the cheek. After all, there was a substantial age difference between them. He'd have to play the 'long game'...

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Ah, here we go again! The usual symptoms. Of course, he'd known for some time he was going through another mid-wife crisis. Two divorces behind, and very likely the third on its way.

He'd once told his second wife: *If they invent a pill that makes me fancy one woman only, I'll take it religiously.* But the state of pharmaceutical science being what it was, the temptation to stray remained overwhelmingly real — not helped, of course, by his celebrity.

Praise for Sir David's interpretations of Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams, and his popularity with the Royal Albert Hall Promenade concert audiences were factors. And he'd often featured in the gossip columns. His choice of wives had guaranteed that: first, a Madonna look-a-like playing virtuoso violin crossover concerts to packed halls and stadiums; then an up-and-coming Australian actress who earned herself an Oscar nomination and moved permanently to Hollywood; most recently, a tall dusky fashion model of African descent who graced the catwalks of every major city in the first and second worlds. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, David had shared their publicity. Fortunately, it hadn't ever come to the point where he was personally plagued by paparazzi. He hoped things would stay that way.

Regardless of Sir David's lineup of spouses, that he was immensely talented in his own right was obvious to everyone; although he could still carry off a natural modesty in public and amongst colleagues and friends. As he often pointed out, it was only an accident of birth — a chance intersection of DNA spirals. He'd worked hard to get where he was, but millions of other people had strived as much as he to apply whatever advantages nature had given them. Mainly he considered himself lucky to be doing something in life that he enjoyed so much. Even so, he was perfectly capable of admitting to himself that he revelled in the attention his success had brought him... especially the attentions of women.

He'd always preferred 'women' to 'wine' — the 'song' component being an obvious given. His take-it-or-leave-it attitude

Variation II

to alcohol and total lack of interest in tobacco could be two reasons why he looked so good for his fifty-two years. And wherever he went, attractive women seemed to congregate.

His third and present wife was by no means stupid. She had an impressive street wisdom way beyond anything he laid claim to. But she lacked the intellectual viewpoint that spearheaded so much of his own interaction with the world. Pandora clearly had that extra component in spades. And, as he approached her table, once more admiring her long, willowy looks, he hoped to make that in hearts as well.

"Fabulous evening, Pan," he said, sitting beside her. "Hope you enjoyed it a fraction as much as I did. Do it again, should we?"

Just then Ronald Chatterton arrived at the table.

"Good heavens, have you two been sitting here since yesterday afternoon?" he asked with a grin, taking the chair opposite Pandora.

Sir David laughed and admitted to the Clifton evening out and the visit to Pan's place where they'd listened to Alice's CD.

"Startling talent, your Alice," Sir David said. "And that third piece on the CD! Amazing, eh?"

Ronald didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

"I can't believe you didn't recognize it," David exclaimed.

But Ronald apparently hadn't.

"Good God, man! Call yourself an Englishman? An English *musician* at that! Elgar's Third for St George and the dragon's sake."

Damn it! He'd overstepped the mark. Ronald's hackles were rising. And who could blame the man? Stupid to intimidate him in such a clumsy manner. Of course, David knew he'd been driven by a boyish desire to impress Pan. Ronald was a decent-looking bloke, and much closer to Pandora's age. Serious competition. But what an idiot move... to try and humiliate Ronald, even in such a trivial way. Not at all his usual style. He'd better smooth things over...

In a far less condescending manner, he explained about Anthony Payne's reconstruction of Elgar's Third Symphony and

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how Alice had played what appeared to be an entirely new version of the first movement.

Ronald listened impassively. He suggested Alice might have improvised the piece.

"But it sounds like pure Elgar," Sir David objected. "As if Elgar had taught it to her himself."

"From beyond the grave, you mean?" Ronald taunted.

Sir David could see he wasn't being taken seriously... although it was true he'd often been drawn to the paranormal and the inexplicable. Science was fascinating. He loved reading about new medical discoveries, about the latest attempts to explore the Solar System and the outer reaches of the Universe. But he believed science could never provide all of the answers — except, thinking of Alice's new version of Elgar's Third... well, there had to be some reasonable way of explaining that, didn't there?

"Do you think, Ronald," he said, "I could have a copy of Alice's CD? I'd like to play it to some of my colleagues up in Brum."

"Easily done," said Ronald. "If Pandora doesn't mind."

Pandora didn't.

Over the next days, Sir David sought a rational explanation for Alice Lawtham's extraordinary Elgar piece. He played it to his co-conductor in Birmingham and to several of the more Elgar-knowledgeable musicians in the orchestra. He burnt a couple of extra copies and posted them off to a musicologist friend in Liverpool and an Elgar specialist at the Royal College of Music. The response was unanimous. Nobody had ever heard Alice's version of the movement nor had the slightest idea where it could have come from.

Returning to Bristol the following week, David was none the wiser. Greg picked him up on Wednesday morning at Temple Meads Station.

"Sorry, there's a problem at our place," Greg said, as they settled into his aging Citroen. "The ceiling in the spare room's sprung an almighty leak. The builders are trying to sort it. But it'll take a few days. Means the usual B&B's out, I'm afraid. You could

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have the living room sofa, of course, except it's like sleeping on a sack of potatoes. Or I could act the model host and take the sofa myself... let you share the double bed with Moira. I'm sure she wouldn't mind. Though it could mean pistols at dawn for you and me afterwards."

David laughed. "Don't worry, I'll find a hotel."

"That *is* an option. But I happened to bump into Pan Bell this morning. She said she's got a spare room. Not big, but you're welcome to use it if you like. She'll be tied up at the Uni most of today, but she gave me a spare key in case you said yes. Want to dump your bag there straight away? Only a stone's throw. Then we can have lunch and I'll drop you at the Colston Hall for your workshop. What d'you say?"

Things were moving faster than David had dared imagine. He pretended reluctance — that he didn't want to put Pandora out. Was she sure he wouldn't be a nuisance? He could easily get a hotel room... But he doubted Greg was taken in.

"If she didn't want you there, she wouldn't have offered," Greg shrugged.

David was pleased to draw the same conclusion.

Before they set off for Totterdown, Greg handed him a CD.

"From Ron Chatterton. He thought you'd be interested. This autistic girl, Alice... seems she's been playing more Elgar stuff. Weird, eh? Three new pieces, though I've only heard the first two. There's an update of the Elgar 3rd first movement. Then a little piano piece — some kind of serenade by the sound of it. And something else that Ron says doesn't make a lot of sense. I haven't heard it yet, but Ron reckons it's somehow got the same Elgarian flavour."

David studied the CD cover. Ron had labelled the tracks as *Symph3/Mov1(TakeTwo)*, *Serenade* & ??????. There was also a phone number.

"Is this Ron's mobile?"

"He said to call if you come up with any ideas."

"I'll call anyway. Thank him for keeping me up to date."

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— * —

Soon after six o'clock, having coached three consecutive school orchestras — two rather good, one abominable — Sir David took a taxi back to Totterdown. He was delighted to find Pan at home. But his hopes of their sharing an enjoyable evening were short-lived.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm going straight back to the department, as soon as I've torted myself up a bit. The Prof's organised a fundraiser. Cocktails at the Uni followed by a three-course dinner at the Woodlands Hotel. All staff expected to attend and smarm up to the invited bigwigs: local politicians, company CEOs and the like. Boring as hell. But critical for our psycho research. No way of getting out of it. Black mark till eternity for anyone defaulting. God knows when I'll get away. Eleven maybe. Might still be time for a quick nightcap... that's if you're awake when I get back."

"A nightcap sounds good," said David, concealing his disappointment, but not entirely giving up hope. Nightcaps could develop into other things.

As soon as he was alone in the house, David fetched the CD he'd received from Ron. Throughout the day, the knowledge of it waiting back at Pandora's place had tantalized David almost as much as thoughts of Pandora herself. He switched on Pan's stereo and inserted the disk.

As promised by Ron's neatly inscribed title, the initial track was a second take on Alice's Elgar Third Symphony, 1st movement. It matched her previous version in many respects. But the gentler sections of the development had been extended, and there were numerous other modifications, especially in the recapitulation and the coda. David had been impressed by Alice's original version. This update was even better and, if possible, even more Elgarian.

The second track was a delicate little piano piece, less than three minutes. Greg had referred to it as a serenade. David was inclined to call it a 'love serenade': tender in its lyricism, with a subtle sense of yearning. The Elgarian character was again very vivid and suggested yet another late-period work. In some ways it

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was reminiscent of the composer's occasionally performed 1932 Serenade for piano. But Alice's serenade struck David as yet more accomplished. It had surprising depth for such a fragile and unassuming piece.

The CD's final track was truly a mystery, and deserved the five question marks Ron had awarded it. More than a quarter of an hour long, but extremely sketchy: little more than a couple of melodic lines running parallel in loose counterpoint with almost no indication of harmony and a surprising number of rests — even a few total silences lasting from one to four bars each. As Ron had said, the music didn't make a great deal of sense. It seemed unfinished, like a partly worked sketch thrown in a drawer and forgotten.

David replayed the first two tracks several times, committing them to memory. Inevitably he was drawn back to the mysterious third piece. Again and again he listened to it, sometimes pausing the CD to appraise its processes — trying to make sense of it musically. He understood why Ron had claimed the melodic lines were Elgarian. David felt the same... And then, in a flash of insight, he realized what this might represent. With growing excitement he checked his premises. Yes, the idea could work. Grabbing his mobile he dialled the number on the back of the CD cover.

"Ronald? Hi, this is David Powys Hughes. Many thanks for sending me the CD. As fascinating as the first one. But this new third track — Alice's mystery piece. I think I've got a line on it. Could it be some kind of palindrome?"

"Not *exactly* a palindrome, no," Ron said. "But it's great you phoned. Perfect timing... It seems I've just cracked it myself."

"Really?"

"An hour or so ago. And the solution's amazing. You want to hear it?"

"Of course! When?"

"Right now, if you like... except we'd have to do it at my place. I could come and get you."

"That'd be fantastic!"

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"Where's your hotel?"

"I'm not at a hotel. I'm camped out at Totterdown. Pan's house."

There was a silence from Ron's end.

"But if you wouldn't mind..." Sir David went on... "I mean, trekking over to fetch me..."

"Pandora could come too," Ron suggested.

"Pan's not here. There's some Psychology Department event she had to attend. Won't be back till late."

"All right, let's do it without her. I'll be over in fifteen."

"Is it a string quartet?" Sir David speculated, on the journey from Totterdown to Bedminster.

"Yes," Ron conceded, but he wouldn't be drawn further, promising a 'live' demonstration as soon as they reached his studio.

To David's relief, Ron was behaving in a natural and friendly manner. The friction of their previous meeting — for which David blamed himself — seemed forgotten or, at least, forgiven.

And before long David found himself in Ron's front room with everything set up ready, the computer switched on and two chairs in front of it.

"Like some coffee?" Ron asked.

"Thanks, later. I'm impatient to hear what you've got."

"Seems you covered the first steps yourself. I expect you realized the piece is in two equal parts: 118 bars followed by another 118 bars. If we look at the first half, it consists of two simple musical strands, upper and lower. I've got them on the screen here, scored onto two different staves."

"What I noticed," Sir David chipped in, "was the lower part never goes below the lowest C of the cello, and the upper part never below the lowest G of the violin."

"Exactly. So, if we assume the occasional two note chords are double stops and that any arpeggiated chords are played across three or four strings, what we're looking at are a violin part and a cello part... though, of course, Alice played them right- and left-handed on the piano."

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David was pleased. He'd been on the right track. He tried his luck further...

"And the second half of the piece has two similar lines, except they're pitched at a higher range. The upper line could be another violin, but the lower now seems to be a viola. So I thought if we take the second half and superimpose it *on top* of the first half, we'll end up with a string quartet texture — two violins plus a viola and a cello."

"You're almost there," Ron grinned, seeming just as pleased as David. "Not quite, though. You see, I tried that superimposition — the two halves straight on top of each other. Here's the result..."

Ron set the computer sequencer running, and Sir David heard a nonsensical cacophony of piano sounds. Damn! He'd been sure it was the answer.

"But," said Ron, pausing the sequencer, "I got the computer to print Alice's music out as a score, and that made it easier to see what was going on. I noticed that a lot of the motives and themes in the *second* section were reverse images of the motives and themes in the *first* section."

"You mean the second half is running backwards?"

"That's it, so I got the sequencer to flip the whole second section — turn it back to front. *Then* I superimposed it over the first half again, and bingo! This is what came out..."

The sequencer again ran its electronic version of a Steinway piano, but this time produced no cacophonous gibberish. Sir David heard a beautiful *adagio* opening of a movement in string quartet texture. He was captivated.

But it wasn't long before Ronald stopped the sequencer. David turned his head in protest.

"Don't worry, you'll hear it all," said Ronald, "but no need to settle for a piano version. I've rearranged the four instrumental lines for two sampled violins, a sampled viola and a sampled cello. Not as convincing as the Steinway imitation, of course. String sounds are way more complex and subtle than a piano's — a lot harder to match electronically. But, with a little aural imagination we can get the idea. Alice performed some places in her piano

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version as very dry staccato. I've interpreted those as *pizzicato*. And I think you'll find the result convincing."

They sat side by side and listened to the whole movement — an eight-and-a-half-minute *Adagio* of considerable beauty. David's excitement grew with every melody and countermelody, with every change of texture. He knew *exactly* what this was!

When the piece ended, they sat in silence.

It was Sir David who spoke first, and with studied reverence...

"Congratulations, Ronald. You've made an extraordinary discovery. I'm ready to swear this is a genuine Elgar work. A mature one at that. In fact, I'd say it carries his late style even further — tighter, more streamlined and straightforward, always beautifully expressive — reminiscent in some ways of the Third Symphony. But it's clearly a brand new piece. Presumably we're the first two ever to hear it. We should get four human players and try it out for real."

"Our department's got an excellent quartet," Ronald said. "Students, but they're brilliant sight-readers. I'm sure they'd be willing. Tomorrow perhaps?"

"The sooner the better, though the *really* big question is how on earth Alice came up with such a beautifully crafted piece. Is it from some long-lost Elgar manuscript? If so, how could Alice have found it? Anyway Pan said she can't read music. First she gives us the Symphony 3 movement... which is wonderful! Her second version's even better than the first. Then that charming little Serenade. But this quartet movement's even more astounding. Why on earth would Alice choose to present it in such a cryptic form? How could she even conceive of such a thing? What's your opinion, Ronald? Does she have enough knowledge of Elgar's works to improvise anything this weird and this convincing?"

Ronald shrugged. "It *is* hard to believe. She only has a handful of his most popular pieces on CD. Her father says she doesn't listen to the radio much and never watches TV."

"Extraordinary, isn't it? To create three brand new masterpieces in mature Elgar style... out of nowhere!"

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"Musical savants are famous for doing amazing things," Ronald reminded him.

"Yes... yes, of course, they are..." Sir David gazed with unfocused eyes at the music notation spread across the computer screen. "But I'll be perfectly frank with you, Ron. I'm beginning to wonder if your flippant comment last week about supernatural intervention might not be the more credible of two unlikely explanations." He swivelled to face Ronald, his expression earnest. "I mean, what if Elgar really is in some way channelling his creativity through Alice's fingers? What if there *is* some genuine supernatural or spiritual force at work here?"

Ronald stared back, his face creasing into amused disbelief. "You can't be serious!" he said... and then he burst out laughing.

* * *

Variation III

Excerpt from Sir David Powys Hughes' website, www.myselgar.co.uk:

Humble Beginnings

Overrated national icon or underrated musical genius? Pompous Victorian/Edwardian poseur or shy, insecure artist? Charming companion or insensitive boor? Each of us is free to choose our vision of the English composer Edward Elgar. I prefer to say that, at different times, Elgar could be any of the above contradictions and a compendium of many others besides. If we are to understand this complex man, we must begin at the beginning.

Edward William Elgar was born on 2 June 1857 in the upstairs bedroom of a small cottage at Broadheath, a village three miles to the northwest of Worcester. He was the fourth of seven children, five of whom survived into adulthood.

His father owned a Worcester High Street music shop, but he also tuned pianos, worked as organist and choir leader at St George's, the local Catholic church, and was a competent violinist who played in the orchestra at the Three Choirs Festival.

When Edward showed an aptitude for music, his father arranged for piano lessons. But this wasn't enough for the boy, who greedily absorbed music knowledge from everywhere

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around him. He attended rehearsals and concerts at Worcester Cathedral and borrowed music from the cathedral library. He searched out books about harmony and orchestration. In the Elgar Bros music shop, he practised and improvised on one of the pianos. And since Edward's family lived over the shop, he sometimes crept down after his parents were asleep to borrow scores and, by candlelight, studied them in secret beneath his tented bedclothes.

Edward also persuaded his father to lend him a violin, and quickly taught himself to play. In his teens, he was standing in for his father as organist at St George's, arranging and composing for the church choir, and playing violin at the local Glee Club and at the Three Choirs Festival. During the summer of his twentieth birthday, Edward was appointed leader and instructor of the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Society and, having taught himself the bassoon, formed a wind quintet from its members for which he composed numerous charming and playful pieces. Some of these would nostalgically resurface in *The Severn Suite* at the very end of his life.

Something I find extraordinary about Edward Elgar's early musical development is the extent to which he was self-taught. Apart from his boyhood piano instruction and a few violin lessons from Adolphe Pollitzer in London, Edward's skills seem to have been acquired by some magical process of osmosis. He learned by listening, reading and doing. And this perhaps is one reason why Elgar the composer remained all his life beyond the pale of—indeed often in fiery opposition to—the English music establishment. It is also, we may suppose, an important factor that contributed to his striking originality.

Through his twenties Edward took every opportunity to broaden his scope. He visited London for concerts and travelled to Leipzig where he heard performances of Schumann, Brahms and Wagner. He made a marginal income giving violin and piano lessons and, one day a week, acted as music director at the County Lunatic Asylum. His compositions were sometimes performed in Worcester and Birmingham.

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Briefly, he was engaged to Helen Weaver, violinist sister of a longstanding musician friend. But she broke it off and emigrated to New Zealand.

Edward's career seemed to be going nowhere special.

Until he met Alice...

Caroline Alice Roberts—she preferred Alice to Caroline—was the daughter of a Major General. When she began piano accompaniment lessons with Edward in October 1886, she was an on-the-shelf 38-year-old. However, after a two- and a half-year courtship, she and Edward were married; much to the chagrin of her family. Not only was Edward more than eight years Alice's junior, he was a Catholic. Almost worse, he was the son of a shopkeeper!

The match does seem a little incongruous, even to 21st-century eyes. Edward was young and dashing. Alice was dumpy, plain-faced, and approaching middle age. We know Edward had been and would remain throughout his life an admirer of feminine beauty. So what did he see in Alice? Her family were convinced he was a gold-digger. One aunt cut Alice out of her will.

My own suspicion is that, if there were an ulterior motive, Edward was attracted not to Alice's money but to her social status. Painfully aware of his humble origins, Edward resented any hint of condescension from those of higher social standing. Nevertheless he had always harboured great ambitions for himself. As a teenager, he once told his mother he would be satisfied only when someone could successfully send a letter to him addressed: *Edward Elgar, England*.

Whatever one might surmise about Edward's marital motives, we cannot doubt that he and Alice were devoted to each other for the whole of their life together. That said, I still find myself immensely curious as to the true nature of their relationship. One family friend described Alice's behaviour toward her husband as that of *the doting mother of a gifted son rather than a wife*—often, sadly it would seem, to the neglect of their real child, Carice.

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It is clear that Alice was as ambitious for Edward's success as he was himself. (Perhaps she also hoped to prove her family wrong about underestimating his worth.) I do not know if her unmarried status before forty was due to a lack of suitors or to her refusal to compromise in a husband. Alice was an intelligent and well-educated woman. She possessed musical skills and sensitivity, wrote poetry and had authored two published novels. I see her as strong-willed—we know how she defied her family over Edward—and as a domineering personality with romantic notions about the role she should play in her marriage. She encouraged Edward when his spirits were low. More importantly, she disciplined his working life. The adult Edward was never a workaholic. He had a tendency to fritter away his time in frivolous pursuits. Alice was his conscience. She had absolute faith in his musical and creative talents and expected him to live up to her idealistic vision. It is my belief that Edward's awareness of her strength of purpose and commitment was one of the most important reasons why he chose Alice as his life's companion: he knew she would bring out the best in him and would relentlessly press him to fulfil his own otherwise dreamy ambitions.

Their first two years of marriage were lived in London, which seemed the best place for furthering Edward's career. And their daughter Carice was born there. But Edward was forever commuting back to the Midlands to play and to give violin lessons. In the end, they accepted defeat (for the time being) and returned to live in the Malvern Hills near Worcester.

Edward would always have a tendency to exaggerate his woes and overreact to perceived slights. He moaned repeatedly about how underestimated he was, and of how he despised having to return to the parochial society of Worcestershire. I find his complaints more than a little dishonest. He was much more a rural than a city man. He revelled in the countryside of the borderlands. He loved to walk—and later cycle—especially on the Malvern Hills. And what *was* this supposedly unsophisticated, parochial Worcestershire society of which he

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claimed to be so disdainful? Let us be clear that *here* he had a wide circle of cultured and musical friends, some from the higher levels of Victorian society to which he so much aspired. Furthermore, they supported his artistic endeavours and offered him stimulating companionship. I cannot believe Edward would have been happier anywhere else—certainly not in noisy, overcrowded, smoggy London.

Despite his distance from the capital, Edward was gradually making a name for himself. His compositions were being published and performed—amongst them such eternal favourites as *Salut d'amour* and the *Serenade for Strings*. However the real turning point in his career would come in his forty-first year with the immensely popular '*Enigma*' *Variations*.

* * *

Sprightly for her seventy-two years, Freddie Royburn stepped down onto Worcester's Foregate Street Station platform and looked around for Gwyneth. There she was, bustling over with that typically excitable and inane expression lighting up her chubby face.

"Freddie, my dear," Gwyneth exploded, "so *wonderful* to see you again. You can't imagine how I've missed you."

Freddie supposed she'd missed Gwyneth too, though probably not to the same extent. It was something of a mystery for Freddie how they'd become friends at all. *Chalk and Cheddar*, she'd often told herself.

But it wasn't unusual for Freddie to be attracted by the vulnerability of others. Was it in contrast to her own self-sufficiency? Or did she just feel an obligation to share out her personal wealth of strength?

One obvious exception had been Eddie. She and Eddie had stood firm together and braved capricious fate with an equal, perfectly matched fortitude. Yes, her dearest Eddie. How grateful she was for the years they'd spent together. How wonderful it

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would be to have him with her still. But Freddie wasn't one to dwell on things she couldn't change. Even now, her life was full of challenges. And she had no intention of shirking any of them.

The welcome back to Worcester included a flailing hug from Gwyneth which knocked Freddie's handbag across the platform and obliged her to drop her suitcase.

"My dear, I'm *so* sorry," Gwyneth fretted, though still beaming with pleasure. "How clumsy of me!" Gwyneth was always apologizing for something.

Freddie was duly fussed out onto the forecourt, where she and her luggage were squeezed into Gwyneth's dumpy Smart ForTwo. And they set off for Henwick Park, crossing the river and following it north, the racecourse on the opposite bank. Gwyneth negotiated the traffic with a terrifying lack of discipline and skill, all the while chattering on about Freddie's ex-neighbours in Baveney Road, most of whom Freddie had scarcely known when she'd lived there and still had minimal curiosity about.

"And you absolutely *must* tell me the latest about Bristol," Gwyneth gushed on, changing subject and lane with equal abruptness, the latter to the accompaniment of angry horns. "Freddie, it's *so* wonderful to get your *lovely* long letters. I read them over and over again. Really I do! But it's not the same as hearing everything straight from *you*, of course — not straight from the horse's mouth. Not that I mean you're a horse, dear. Or that you look like one at all. Just the opposite..."

Freddie wondered what the opposite of a horse might look like. But she tried to answer the flood of questions about Michael — "your poor dear nephew... however did he manage alone all those years?... he must be so grateful for the way you've uprooted yourself" — or about "that poor little mite, Alice... and does she still play the piano all day?... you must find that a little tiring at times... I know I would, but then you're such a saint..."

Despite everything, Freddie was fond of Gwyneth. An element of gratitude was involved. When Freddie's husband had passed away suddenly two years ago, Gwyneth, a widowed neighbour three doors down, had befriended her at the post office;

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subsequently taking her on shopping expeditions, inviting her out to sedate but cosy cafes or tea parlours, where she'd allowed Freddie to reminisce at length about her life with Eddie. Freddie would have coped perfectly well with grief on her own. But Gwyneth's spontaneous kindness had been a comfort.

As they drove into Baveney Road and parked outside Gwyneth's semi-detached, Freddie glanced briefly at her own former home. The new occupants had been quick to make changes. Different curtains in the windows gave an instant unfamiliarity. More radically, the stained-glass front door had been replaced by a solid oak one. And Freddie was saddened that the front-garden roses she'd lovingly tended for so many years had been dug up and the small lawn levelled and gravelled over to make a parking place for the family's second car. She wondered for a moment what other transformations might have been wrought on the back garden, but concluded it was better not to know. She'd spent many happy years in that house, but it could never be the same without Eddie. It had been time to move on.

Throughout the delicious dinner at Baveney Road that evening — Gwyneth was a cook of enviable skills — the hostess had kept up a continuous chatter. Freddie found her even more manic than usual, as if she were building up to something special but didn't quite know how to begin. Having refused throughout the meal to let Freddie lift a finger, Gwyneth now cleared away the dessert and suggested they carry their coffee into the living room. That was where it finally came out...

"Freddie dear, there's something I've been *especially* meaning to tell you about," Gwyneth said archly, as soon as they were settled. "I've been waiting for just the right moment because I think it's really, really important — for you as well as me, my dear."

This sounds ominous, thought Freddie.

"What it is... well, I've been to visit a lady called Ysobel who lives in Malvern. I've seen her twice already, and she's what they call a 'medium'. A friend at the social club told me about her, and

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then I just had to find out for myself. She's such a sweet girl... Ysobel is, I mean... well, my friend's sweet too, though not such a *girl* anymore..." Gwyneth gave a nervous giggle. "Anyway, Ysobel knows how to contact the spirits of the departed. She's *ever* so gifted, *really* she is. The first time I went for a sitting... well, it was very interesting, but I wasn't contacted myself. One of the other sitters was though. He spoke to his departed sister. It was really very touching. In tears, he was. Well, so was I... especially the next time... because, you see, the second time I went my Graham talked to *me*, and it was wonderful to —"

"What do you mean?" Freddie interrupted. "Your Graham talked to you? Your husband, Graham?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, Freddie it was wonderful! And he told me how much he loves me still, and how he misses me, and how one day we'll be together again, and —"

"How could he talk to you, Gwyneth? He's been dead for five years!"

"Of course, it wasn't exactly *his* voice. It was Ysobel speaking for him. But I know it was him really... He called me 'Bunny', just like always, and he knew all about our house, and he asked if the immersion heater is still playing up and how the 'dizzy lizzies' are coming on and whether the milkman is still as rude as ever and..."

Gwyneth continued in this fashion for some time, but eventually reached the nub of the matter, which was exactly as Freddie had begun to fear.

"Oh, but Freddie... you *really* should try it yourself," Gwyneth urged excitedly. "I *know* you'd find it *such* a comfort... the same as I did — to know our loved ones are waiting for us somewhere on the other side — that we'll see them again. *Please* say you'll come. I can phone Ysobel tomorrow morning. I'm sure she'll fit us in. She's such a dear. Especially under the circumstances — I mean, that you're only here for a *very* short time. Oh, you *will* let me, won't you? Like I say, I could phone her straight after breakfast. Please say yes! Please, *please* do!"

Though Freddie hesitated, she already knew she wouldn't have the heart to refuse what obviously meant so much to Gwyneth...

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not to mention that agreeing would head off further badgering over the weekend.

And who knows? Freddie thought. *I've written almost nothing since I got to Bristol. Perhaps this 'Ysobel' will give me some fresh ideas.*

Freddie enjoyed the journey to Malvern the following afternoon — that is, once they'd escaped the Worcester traffic and reached the open road where Gwyneth's driving could cause less anxiety and embarrassment. This was a familiar ride. One she'd travelled often with Eddie. They'd loved watching the hedged fields slide by as the green and purple, gorse-topped hills rose before them. Even far into their sixties they'd donned sturdy hiking boots and walked south or north along the nine-mile ridge, taking in one or more of its peaks: Raggedstone, Hollybush, Swinyard and Hangman's Hills; Broad Down and Herefordshire Beacon; Pinnacle, Perseverance, Summer and Sugar Loaf Hills — Freddie still relished the evocative names — and highest of all, at nearly 1,400 feet, Worcestershire Beacon, from where you could recoup your breath until you had it taken away by the stunning views across the Vale of Evesham to the Cotswolds in the east and across Herefordshire westwards to the looming Black Mountains of South Wales.

But there would be no hill climbs this afternoon. Their destination was half a mile short of the northern ridge, at Malvern Link. In Victorian times the Link's railway station had welcomed countless visitors intent on tasting the famous Malvern water and reviving themselves at the spas and springs which dotted the lower flanks of the hills.

During the drive, Freddie had more or less tuned out Gwyneth's voice, giving occasional nods and vague sounds of approval or disapproval as her companion's commentary required. Privately she'd been savouring the many happy memories this route conjured from the years she'd shared with Eddie. But now they'd entered the built-up northeastern edge of Malvern, and Freddie

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was abruptly brought back to the present as Gwyneth turned off, or rather lurched off, the A449 into Alexandra Road.

"Ysobel's house is up there on the right," Gwyneth announced. "See that one with the big magnolia tree?"

It was a fair-sized semidetached from the 1920s or 30s; less imposing than some of the older houses on this residential street, but boasting a measure of personality: two-storied, plus an attic room between steeply sloping eaves.

Gwyneth parked the car outside — a full two feet from the kerb — and they made their way up the path to the front porch. Freddie was amazed to see a large and powerful-looking motorbike with a sidecar on the drive beside the house. Most surprising was the way it had been painted with a vivid yellow depiction of the sun from which red and orange flames blazed along the fuel tank and trailed around the frame to enfold a glittering and ferocious-looking chrome exhaust. The sidecar was similarly, even more intricately decorated. Fiery silhouetted letters in black and scarlet proclaimed the vehicle to be *Phaethon's Sun Chariot*.

At that moment, an enormous man in grubby jeans and wearing an open black leather waistcoat over his bare upper torso appeared from behind the house. His tattooed biceps bulged, as did his beer-drinker's belly. His black hair was thick and curly on the sides of his balding head and sprouted like coarse fur across his arms and shoulders and what could be seen of his chest. Most astounding of all was the long, tapering beard which stopped short only a few inches above the straining waistband of his jeans.

Gwyneth waved cheerily toward this apparition and received a nonchalant salute in return as the man prepared to mount his appropriately oversized motorcycle.

"Ysobel's husband," Gwyneth said, with studied complacency. But as soon as they were safe inside the porch and out of sight, she giggled gleefully at her friend's astonishment.

"I know he looks scary. But he's really *very* nice," she assured Freddie. Whatever else she might have wanted to add on this subject was drowned out as the motorbike exploded into life and coasted thunderously down the drive onto the street. By the time

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the roar of the *Sun Chariot* was fading, somebody had answered Gwyneth's push of the doorbell and was beckoning them inside.

"Ysobel said I's to let you in," explained a plump and smiling middle-aged lady whose exuberant accent and ebony skin identified her as West Indian. "You's the last. So now we's all here, darlins."

Freddie and Gwyneth followed the woman's generous, rhythmically swinging bottom along the corridor into a cosy parlour at the back of the house. The decor was more 'hippie' than the 'gypsy-fortune-teller' model Freddie might have expected... that is, had she genuinely bothered to contemplate the matter beforehand. *Pure 1960s*, she thought, pleausurably surprised. Though born slightly too early to participate in the 'swinging' herself, Freddie remembered those years with vicarious nostalgia.

All four walls of the parlour were hung in colourful Indian cotton, beaded curtains and macrame tapestries. At each corner were multi-levelled wooden shelves supported by stacked, brightly painted breeze blocks. Each shelf bore a selection of burning candles of various shapes and colours, and a sweet, seductive aroma of incense pervaded the room. Heavy dark-red drapes covered the single window, excluding the summer daylight. Most of the room's illumination came from a crystal chandelier hanging low over the middle of a large oval table that dominated the room. Seven high-backed wooden chairs ringed the table, their red padded seats matching the window drapes. Three of the chairs were occupied, and the West Indian lady lowered herself into a fourth. Before Freddie or Gwyneth could decide which of the remaining three to take, Ysobel entered the room behind them.

"Good evening," their hostess said quietly, her voice educated and revealing no regional accent. "You're looking well, Gwyneth. And this must be your friend. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance... Winifred, is it not? Please, ladies, be seated. My custom is to take this chair at the head of the table."

If Freddie were too old to have joined the 60s hippie movement, Ysobel was too young by fifteen or twenty years. Freddie placed her at close to forty. Even so, she wore a

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voluminous, tie-died, caftan-like robe, and around her neck, adorning her ample breast, were a dozen or more strings of wooden, amber, jasper and onyx beads. Her brow was encircled by a woven, beaded headband suggesting to Freddie a past-her-prime Pocahontas or Hiawatha. Ysobel's face was not one to earn a second glance on the street or in the supermarket, but her hair was striking: long and wavy, an attractive reddish brown that Freddie guessed to be genuine rather than out of a bottle. The loose garment left room for doubt, but Ysobel appeared to be somewhat overweight — though not a big woman: in fact, she was rather short. Freddie couldn't help visualizing her, both vertically and horizontally, beside her giant of a husband! As the three of them took their seats at the table, Freddie concluded that Ysobel's most appealing feature was her smile: gentle and mysterious. Had she cultivated it or was it a convenient accident of birth?

"Before we settle ourselves for the sitting," Ysobel said, almost shyly, "there is something we must be completely sure about. It is of great importance that we allow no conflicting frequencies or waves to be present within our circle or in its near vicinity... not only to avoid the disruption of a potential connection between myself and the spirit world, but because there may be genuine dangers involved — perhaps for the spirits as well as for ourselves. I must therefore ask that all mobile telephones be switched off — not just in 'silent' mode, but with the power turned off completely."

There was a rustle of activity as the guests searched for mobile phones in handbags and pockets, followed by numerous quiet beeps as operating menus were negotiated.

Just like taking a scheduled flight, thought Freddie. *I hope we won't be flying too high... or too far off the map...*

"I apologise," Ysobel went on, "if I seem mistrustful in this matter, but the consequences of an error could be dire. I must insist on personally checking that the de-powering has been carried out correctly. The risks to myself and indirectly to yourselves are somewhat unfathomable but cannot be taken

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lightly. Would each of you therefore please allow me to inspect your telephones?"

The mobiles were solemnly handed one by one to Ysobel for examination, after which the owners restored them to their respective places.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Ysobel said, and rose for a moment to operate the dimmer switch near the door. She didn't turn the electric lighting off altogether, merely subdued it to give more emphasis to the flickering candles.

Freddie had to admit the result was atmospheric.

"We may now prepare ourselves for the séance," said Ysobel, settling herself once more at the table. "Are you seated in an order that you find agreeable? There should be no tensions in the chosen configuration. Would anyone prefer a different arrangement?"

Nobody spoke up.

"Very good. Now please make yourselves comfortable. Those of you who have never attended a séance before, I ask you to relax. The necessary precautions have been taken. There is no cause for concern. I shall be your guide throughout. However I must warn you that as a medium I can only make myself available to the spirit world at large. There is no guarantee that any of you will contact the departed loved ones you seek. They must in turn be themselves open and sympathetic to our call. However, if they detect your presence in the room, there is truly a chance that contact will be made... Now I suggest that we join hands around the table. Let our spirits in this way overlap and flow together. The circle we make will reinforce the aura that each of us possesses individually, the sum greater than its parts. This may, in turn, draw members of the spirit plane in our direction."

Freddie was seated to the right of Ysobel, who now reached out to take Freddie's hand in her own before lowering it onto the green damask tablecloth. The younger woman's skin was cool and dry to the touch — the hand reassuring in its firm but comfortable grip. To Freddie's own right sat Gwyneth. In contrast, *her* hand felt moist and overheated. Beyond Gwyneth was an overdressed, peroxide blonde of middle age; then a dapper, military-looking

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gentleman; next to him a sad, prematurely shrivelled-up woman of about thirty; finally the plump West Indian lady, who completed the circle of hands with Ysobel.

"It is my usual practice," Ysobel explained, "to begin every sitting with a short period of meditation. Ten minutes may be enough. Sometimes more is needed, sometimes less. You may accompany me in this meditation if you wish. Your assistance could help to guide the spirits."

Her eyes became hooded, half closed. She tilted her head upwards a fraction, and rolled it several times around her shoulders, like an athlete or dancer warming up for strenuous activity.

"Let us now breathe deeply... long, sustaining breaths. Feel the air enter and refresh us... then let it flow back transformed — carrying a part of our own essence outwards and beyond to the trees and the plants that gratefully receive it as their own. In turn they will offer it back imbued with something of *their* physical essence. Thus the natural cycle of life continues on this earth, flowing back and forth — a mutual and shared gift with and to each other. We are part of this cycle of life and here, for now at least, we belong." She paused in her calmly flowing stream of words while everyone breathed deeply together...

"Although not for always shall we belong to this sphere," Ysobel continued, pausing at intervals coincident with her long breaths. "There is another part of us — a unique spirit each of us possesses that is immortal... And this spirit may also flow in small amounts between us — just as a part of our life essence flows in and out as we breathe... Therefore we may reach out and touch each other's spiritual essence... At times this touching may be stronger, as when we share love with another person. But the communal spirit is always present. If we wish, we can allow it to enter us as naturally as we breathe the air... It is all around, and each of us on this earth contributes to it... Shall we now then let this spirit enter us within this circle? Imagine it as a beautiful golden light... Feel it touch our faces, touch the skin of our bodies... Feel its caress even as it flows gently into each of us to

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mingle with our very own spiritual essence. A golden glow... Sometimes we may even see it thus — a golden light softly enclosing and protecting our bodies. In this manner it may flow between us... through our linked hands, bringing us closer... creating from all of us around this table a single entity, in a sense a single being..."

Ysobel said nothing further for almost a minute.

Although the silence was long, Freddie didn't find it oppressive. On the contrary, it seemed to tingle pleasantly against her skin and flow through her hands to and fro with the people either side of her. For a moment, she wondered if she really could see a faint golden aura hovering around the medium's head and shoulders.

Don't be fanciful, Freddie reproved herself... though she was obliged to admit that the mystic ambience Ysobel had evoked was beginning to affect her.

When Ysobel at last spoke again, it was in little more than a murmur, almost a sigh... "I now feel a presence in the room... and it is a male presence..."

Her voice then grew a little stronger, though still pausing between the phrases...

"It is the spirit of a man who has passed over... who has moved onto the second plane... Yet he is troubled... There is something in his past life that weighs heavily... which prevents him from proceeding to further planes..."

Another longer silence...

"He is drawn to our circle for a reason... There is someone here with whom he wishes to make a connection... a person that, in some way, he recognizes, but has earlier been unable to reach... someone perhaps who has never attempted earlier to reach out to another spiritual plane..."

"That could be you, Freddie," Gwyneth breathed, in suppressed excitement. "Is the spirit called Eddie?" she whispered to Ysobel.

Freddie sensed through the medium's hand a ripple of disturbance, or what might have been annoyance at this interruption... However, several seconds later, Ysobel responded calmly enough to the question... "I cannot say the name. I do not

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hear the name. I only see it... indistinct... blurred... as if in a fog. There are five, perhaps six letters. I see only the first. I am only sure of an E. Yes, an E at the beginning... And the spirit seems regretful... There is something in his past life that he regrets. Regret is what draws him back... And he remembers a journey. I am unsure if it was he who made the journey... No, I think not himself... but someone dear to him... And now the name becomes clearer. The second letter is also in focus. The name begins with E and D... I am now certain. It is E, D, and some three or four letters following."

"It *has* to be Eddie," Gwyneth whispered again. "Oh, Freddie, I'm sure it is! What do you think the journey means?"

Freddie was disconcerted. She had no idea what the 'journey' might be. Of course, she didn't! What had started out as a silly parlour game was heading in an unsettling direction. She didn't know what she'd expected of this so-called 'séance'. But it had to be a hoax, surely? She shouldn't have let Gwyneth persuade her. She shouldn't have come.

"I sense that the spirit recognizes someone here who can help him," Ysobel went on... "someone who has entered our circle this evening. He feels your presence. He is reaching out... and he wishes to atone. Yes, there is someone here who... No, now a curtain of mist obscures my sight. I cannot apprehend the force that draws his spirit back to us... And yet, in the mist, I see a third letter: not just E and D... also a W."

Gwyneth gave Freddie a sidelong glance, glowing with triumph.

Freddie pretended not to notice. She wasn't ready to accept any of this as genuine. She wanted it to stop. And even if it *were* her late husband trying to make contact, whatever would she do about it? If she persuaded herself to believe in this farce, it still wouldn't bring Eddie back, would it? Not in any real sense. So what was the point? It might only renew her grief, not alleviate it. Why couldn't she get up and leave? Why was she still sitting here... hypnotized?

"Once again I feel the spirit's sense of regret," Ysobel intoned. "He blames himself for something... But I do not perceive what

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that may be... unless it is once more the journey... The mist has parted again. Now the whole name is clear to me. It is Edward."

"Ohhhh," Gwyneth gasped softly, deflated.

Freddie was startled too. How could she have let herself be drawn in so easily? How absurd! Yet, in the anticlimax, her feelings were a strange mixture of relief and disappointment...

"It can't be my husband," Freddie said aloud, her voice jarring strangely in the candlelit room. "My husband's name was Edwin, not Edward."

Ysobel's concentration seemed to waver. Her eyes opened momentarily. "Please, do not speak," she warned, though with the same calm. "You must allow the spirit to reach out — to communicate through me. I need silence, or the fragile link may break."

Ysobel closed her eyes again, and absolute quiet settled on the gathering.

A full minute elapsed before Ysobel resumed: "He is drawn..." she said... "drawn to... No, I am unsure... to a person, I think, but again I see only letters in my mind: the letters C and A... Are they initials? Help me spirit. Help me, Edward. Who is C and A?"

And now Freddie watched a disturbing change come over Ysobel. The medium's eyes opened wider, staring, though she seemed to see nothing near at hand — rather to be gazing into a distance far beyond the confines of the room, perhaps beyond the confines of this earth. Her body had become rigid, and a long guttural sound issued from her throat — not loud, but unnaturally deep and resonant from such a small woman. And from this sound a voice formed... barely audible at first, although the words were distinguishable:

"...*Caroline Alice*..." the voice said. At once Ysobel seemed to recover. Her eyes remained unfocused, but otherwise she appeared to be herself again.

"Caroline Alice?" Ysobel asked in her normal voice. "Who is Caroline Alice? Do you reach out to Caroline Alice?"

The military-looking gentleman, shuffled in his chair. "There may be a local connection," he whispered self-consciously, "I

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mean a connection with Malvern. Edward could be the composer, Edward Elgar. His wife's name was Caroline Alice."

Again the medium gave no sign of registering this interruption. But after some seconds, a strange dialogue began between Ysobel's normal voice and the quiet guttural whisper which each time seemed to invade her physically for a few seconds before and after it spoke. The dialogue was slow. As much as half a minute could elapse between the questions, answers and questions again...

"Is Caroline Alice the name of your wife, Edward?"

...*My wife*... the guttural voice answered.

"And where is your wife?"

...*Beyond*...

"Beyond this room? Beyond this earth?"

...*Beyond this plane*...

"Is she not a spirit like yourself?"

...*Beyond this plane*...

"Is it her you reach out to?"

...*Not her. Another*...

"Not Caroline Alice?"

...*Yes, Caroline Alice*...

Ysobel hesitated longer this time, seeming to grapple with the contradiction.

"Do you mean another Caroline Alice?"

...*Another Caroline Alice*...

"And is this other Caroline Alice a spirit like yourself?"

...*Of your earth*...

"She lives still? She is still on our plane?"

...*Yes*...

"And why do you reach out to this other Caroline Alice?"

...*Amends*...

"You wish to make amends?"

...*Yes*...

"Make amends to Caroline Alice?"

...*No*...

"To whom do you wish to make amends?"

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The spirit said nothing...

There was now an intense stillness in the room. Freddie realized she was holding her breath.

"Are you still with us, Edward?" Ysobel asked.

...*Forced us apart*...

"You were forced apart from Caroline Alice?"

...*Rejected*...

"Did she reject you?"

...*I must make amends*...

"Do you mean *you* rejected *her*?"

...*Lost*...

The last few replies had become fainter, harder to catch, as if the ghostly voice were fading into the distance.

Ysobel asked more questions: Have you lost someone? ...Whom did you lose? ...Why did you lose her? ...Is there someone in this room who can help? ...Who is the other Caroline Alice?

But the spirit's replies had become undecipherable mumblings. Now came an exhalation like a prolonged sigh, and Freddie sensed that Ysobel was alone again.

"Are you there, Edward?" Ysobel persisted... "I can no longer feel you... Will you still speak to us?..."

There was no response.

Ysobel sagged in her chair. Her head rolled onto her chest. She remained in this immobile state for more than a minute. The others around the table neither spoke nor moved a muscle, as if in deference to the ordeal their hostess had undergone for their sake.

Eventually Ysobel straightened in her chair and looked up, though at no one in particular.

"The link is broken," she said blankly. "I am weary. I shall retire." She stood from the table, and drifted from the room.

One by one, the others also rose. Without a word, merely exchanging nods, they dispersed from the house... back to their own lives... carrying away their private thoughts about what they had just witnessed.

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