

With Broken Wings

Sacher Torte

Local Legend Publishing UK

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A Record of this Publication is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-907203-18-3

Local Legend Publishing
Park Issa
St Martin's Road
Gobowen, Shropshire
SY11 3NP, UK
www.local-legend.co.uk

Cover Design by Titanium Design
www.titaniumdesign.co.uk

Cover illustration courtesy of
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To all my special people; thank you for being you.

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Her debut book is *With Bells on his Toes*, published by Local Legend Publishing in January 2010 and available from leading book stores and online, ISBN 978-1907203-10-7.

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One

Mally Kenyon was only lightly intoxicated as he came out of the Dog's Bed Inn in Lower Quinton still chuckling under his breath at a joke that Tock, the landlord, had told the gathered assembly. It was shortly before midnight on a very cold April evening; a wind with saw teeth almost cutting him in two. About him the town lying quiet under street light; its inhabitants driven indoors early by the very same wind. No lingering tonight for those with decent homes and warm firesides to go to unlike the man whose lonesome path would lead him over the road bridge, down the dark streets to a place of cold comfort. Going home for Mally Kenyon was never an easy decision to make. Not when he looked ahead of him to an empty bed, a cold hearth and a lonely existence in the pig sty he rented, not more than a half mile into the estate itself; a series of circular roads and cul-de-sacs making it dead end perfect for the thieves and dealers of which Mally Kenyon was one.

Finishing the last cigarette in his packet of twenty he ground it underfoot before turning his jacket collar up, cursing the thin material when he should have worn a fleece. Then he held his work-toned arms tight against his lean length to retain what little warmth he had in his inadequate clothing, shivering as the chill breeze frisked through the thin jeans and washed out T-shirt under the lightweight zip-up, knowing that part of his cold was caused by hunger. Living on beer and cigarettes was taking its toll. Hair dull and lifeless. His whiskery face sunken into hollows. The unkemptness about him making him look much older than his years. He sighed heavily as the effluence from his cigarette wreathed his face in drifting smoke, his countenance only for a moment showing worry for tomorrow's God-given grace of having enough work to keep the wolf from the door.

Then the police van and the dog appeared within his vision. Unexpected. There on the road bridge in front of him. The sight of it stopped him dead. A big man, gaunt of frame but still standing over six feet in height, Mally knew that there was no trying to pretend he was invisible as he noted the marked van parked with its bonnet pointing towards his own direction on the opposite side of Bridge Twenty-Eight which spanned the Whemley Canal. The van with its back door open to reveal the dog which had been set on guard duty. One moment lying down licking its bits, the next ears alert to Mally's noisy intrusion into its privacy after he had let the pub door clatter behind him. The dog slowly rising to take up the space in a sitting position to the rear of the van. Wolf eyes

upon him.

For several moments Mally found himself unable to think. Not about the things in his pockets, which he would rather not be found on his person, but what to do about the dog. His fear of the large animal had caught him unawares. He felt himself weakening as an uncontrolled panic poured through him like a river in flood. Where was the handler? being the first coherent question in his head. The dog was unrestrained and the rear door to the van open. Then the flashes of recurring visions which had created and exacerbated his fear of German Shepherd dogs from being a child. Very sight of one sufficient to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He could no more creep away, at that moment, than he could do the impossible and run. His heart began to pound. His breath shortened as his panic mounted.

The dog's head went down further.

Mally held his breath. What he would have given in that moment to be somewhere else. Lifted up and hoisted away by winged angels as the dog's snout drew on the air between them across the width of the street, eyes glinting deep as it smelled the entrails of his fear. Though it remained unmoving, the dog had sensed his panic. A low growl emanating from between fanged teeth. Futile to try to escape. Stand still, he told himself. Defiance on his face, now, as he held his aversion at bay; barely.

Magdalene watching, too, from her bedroom window. He saw her in the upstairs window of the houses which backed onto the canal, looking out, trance-like, as if unaware of her view of the bridge. Too distant to guess her thoughts but ever hopeful that she might be thinking of him. Face keened to the glass. Was she looking in his direction or beyond him? All the more reason to keep his fear contained. It was not for Magdalene to know that she was his other weakness. Always had been and always will be; a woman too virtuous for her own good. Went to church, kneeled before the altar and said her Hail Mary's, as directed by her priest, while her mother shuffled the Tarot cards and looked into the crystal for her own direction, mumbling runes and worshipping the Earth itself. She had foretold the future when she had drawn The Tower and laid it before her daughter as the symbolic representation of Magdalene's disastrous marriage to his twin brother, Bass, now deceased. A daughter born to them before Bass had departed life and the child taken into care. Bass had had no God. Neither had Magdalene, then. Not as now.

Mally neither. No belief sufficient enough to save him now from his biggest fear: that of dogs which looked like wolves and could hunt in packs. Stuff of his worst nightmares when they never failed to hunt him down. Snapping at his heels as he tried to escape them. Omens, perhaps,

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marauding untamed through his dreams. Terrible howling visions of bared teeth which could have him waking in the night from his own screaming cries. Sweat dripping off him and nothing else to do but rise, stare into a fire, and take something to ease his mind. Even one lone dog enough to petrify him and scare him witless.

The only thing to save him now came into his vision as a moving figure between the van and the parapet of the bridge, which spanned the canal some fifteen feet below, where the uniformed police officer must have been standing, looking over at Mally, seeing his respect for the animal written on a fearing face. No respect returned.

Seen! The dark figure in a dark blue uniform, beckoning him, flat hat crushed under his armpit as he turned from looking down into the canal water, with a shimmering, silver dog chain in his hand. Then, as if to denote some other tangible reference for Mally to fear, he raised the hand that held the dog chain and shouted to the now whimpering, obedient creature, "Stay, Timber!" At the same time, his face flattening with some form of recognition, revealed by the ochre glow of the bridge lamp. "A word if I may!"

Eyes on the dog still, Mally kept to his own pavement for several paces before crossing over. No inkling what the man could possibly have been looking for over the bridge parapet when all that would be visible was a long, narrow, and stinking, weed filled ditch of stagnant water, amputated like an infected, flesh rotted limb from the reclaimed canal branches that ran through the centre of Quinton. He looked behind him. The leaded windows of the Dog's Bed Inn steamed with the breath of whoever had hidden himself behind a curtain, looking out.

Mally took his time crossing the road, senses alert still, fear of the dog causing him to walk cautiously. No reason apparent to Mally's thinking for the police presence as far as he was aware. In the main, the police stayed out of Lower Quinton and in particular the Dog's Bed Estate; a place divided from civilization by the stinking cesspit of abandoned rubbish and carelessly shed litter in a pool of slimy water that even the majority of people from the Dog's Bed stayed clear of.

So why was he here? Why the dog? The police rarely visited and only when they had to, choosing not to get trapped by the narrow bridge and beyond the one-way warrens of dead end roads and alleyways between the high rises. When they did venture in, they came in greater numbers, in riot vans with Perspex shields and armed to the teeth. Unless they were called here for the sake of an accident or someone missing, that is. Sometimes to discover the decomposing remains of an old person not seen for several days. Otherwise, let the low life police themselves or kill

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each other in the process, their backs turned to even the worst of the criminal element as long as they were confined within this delta of flat land, both trapped by and exposed to the long, low hills behind.

“Move a bit quicker, lad. This is urgent.”

Where was his mate? Mally looked about, keeping the van and the dog within his peripheral vision.

“This isn’t to do with you, lad. Just a simple question.”

A voice came up from below the parapet of the bridge, heralded by the golden, arced light of a randomly sweeping torch beam; female. “There’s nothing here, Serge. False call, I think.”

The copper on the bridge turned to Mally again as he came under the same ochre street lamp. Mally felt exposed by his expression, quickly looking down before he was caught by his own telltale silver eyes. “Thought I knew you. Mally Kenyon isn’t it?”

“What if it is? Done nothing.”

Mally saw the dog lead in the officer’s hand being jingled as he thought on Mally’s infamy. Then he folded the dog’s restraint and gave one clacking slap against his own gloved palm, piercing what small hold Mally had on his inner controls, like the spike on a tin opener to his inner can of worms.

As if his flesh was infested, Mally could feel his nerve ends writhing as he placed his shaking hands deep in his pockets and dug them into the mishmash within, letting his neck sink into his turned-up collar, detesting his fear and thinking that his memorable face was part of the Kenyon curse. That curse being their physical likeness to each other. More the Kenyon eyes than the broad shouldered, fair-haired tallness. Eyes the colour of darting, silver fish in murky water; curious, too, despite being fearful of an obedient wolf-dog. Eyes that when angry flashed hot like the molten metal within an alchemist’s crucible. At their most dangerous and deepest, the solid grey of cold mercury at the bottom of a thermometer before the slow rise of the clenching fists that most defined Mally’s social ineptness. His worst trait being a sudden and unpredictable temper which could take even himself by surprise at times.

But not with a wolf watching. Mally set his face into a cooperative blank, taking care not to scuff the heels of his steel toe-capped, builder’s boots as he crossed over, followed now by Tock Bartlett, landlord of the Dog’s Bed Inn; Magdalene’s father. “What’s going on?”

Mally, eyes as hard as polished steel, now. “I’ve done nothing!”

The officer nodded to the man he knew by sight, already. “Never said you had. We’ve been called out to solve a mystery. What’s this about a child being stuck in the canal, under the bridge? Got a call at the station.”

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Mally shrugged. "News to me. You sure you heard right?"

"This is Bridge Twenty-Eight? Someone pinched the number plaque off the bridge. Something about a child under the water."

Mally shrugged again. What did he care? "Kids are always falling in the canal. Can't be above a metre deep at its deepest, any road."

"Sure it's not a false call-out?" asked the landlord.

The voice from below was hesitant now. "There's something moving under the water but I can't make out what it is. Get down here quick."

The copper took the brick steps down two at a time, leaving Mally free to go if he should so choose to do so. It was the landlord's hand on his shoulder which went against his better judgement, "He said something about a child in the water. Best check it out ourselves."

Mally went with the propulsion of a hand to his shoulder, following on behind with a puzzled frown at his own obsequiousness but away from the dog which had now turned itself about and was watching him intently through the cage bars, looking over between the front seats. With access to the canal bank, he might get home another way.

Under the arch, on the opposite side of the brick tunnel, the water rinsed a wide, greasy, undulating line over the noxious ditch.

"Something's causing the water to move," said the female officer, torch beam roving through darkness. "Something made a splash. God! Look at the filth."

Pity she was a pig. She had the kind of breasts Mally liked to worship; large and pendulous.

"Stinks!" The torch roving to linger on their faces in order for the policewoman to see who had accompanied her colleague down the steps. Her eyes rolled at sight of Mally Kenyon; local thug, often to be seen at the station, hauled in from the back of the drunk-tank, fighting drunk or out of his head on drugs. She smiled vaguely at Tock.

Mally saw nothing other than an escape plan...a slow walk...a light jog...a fast dash at a suitable moment. Recalling the geography of the towpath: left, to Quinton. Right, the towpath changed sides; only the bridge linking one side to the other, but his access that way clear as long as he crossed the canal by wading through the water, as filthy as it looked. He needn't pass the dog again.

Thinking about it, he let his eyes roam with the torch beam. He didn't like being under bridges. Not here with this stench. Needles and condoms amidst a dumped stew of other discarded rubbish...bike wheels...the legs of an old armchair standing up above the stagnant water like an installation of modern art. Showing daily. Admission free to the

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discerning public. Bring your own nose clip, Mally thought. That arch above his head reminding him of something to do with the wolf of his nightmares. Didn't know why, though. Yet another thing of menace from a menaced childhood.

"There. Look. Centre, more or less. A sack. It's moving in the water."

Mally journeying closer to the officers he would have to pass before taking off for the allotments. The wolf was still up there. Safe!

The policewoman bent to shine her light on one area where the water was undulating slightly. She had no interest in Mally. The male officer likewise distracted. The chain, looped on his wrist, now, never stopping moving.

Mally made another couple of side steps to get past them.

"There's something recently been thrown in. Maybe it's just the air coming out and causing the water to be disturbed."

Mally looked up and down the towpaths, summoning his night eyes. No one about now but themselves and a dog beginning to whine fractiously with its handler out of sight. The dog lead now being thrashed around on a spin cycle behind his back as the officer leant to look at concentric rings of disturbed water in the torch light.

Mally and Tock hung back, purely onlookers, watching the so-called protectors of the people at work, while standing in the criss-crosses and circular patterns in the mud, under their respective feet. The circles of light travelling over the black, brackish water. There was no sign of a child. "It was there a minute ago...something moving under the surface...a sort of wriggling sack just under the surface."

Mally looked, despite himself, as another step took him towards their group. Water just undulating quietly. Then it thrashed. There was something moving in the central beam between the arc of the bike wheel and some floating upholstery, central to the rings of disturbed, viscid, dark liquid as if something living was trapped under there.

"Can't be a fish. Probably kittens," Tock breathed into Mally's ear, following him as closely as if he had a button caught in Mally's jacket. "Who'd phone up the police about a few kittens in a sack? A water rat, maybe," the landlord offered, making a case for leaving sacks in clogged up canals to keep their secrets.

Mr PC Plod, no doubt, an expert on the wildlife to be found in the stagnant, rancid, rubbish clogged canals of Britain. "A rat wouldn't cause a disturbance like that...more a wake. They keep their noses above water most of the time when swimming."

It takes a rat to know a rat, Mally felt like saying.

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So who was going in then? Her or her dog-chain-jangling superior? Now doing up and down waterfalls of the supple, silver chain from one gloved hand to the other.

She folded her arms on her own unspoken decision and looked at her superior officer with a feminine query concerning his manhood.

The policeman read her thoughts. He, obviously, disagreed with her unspoken proposal. No way to get a man who wore starched collars and shined his shoes to a mirror finish, probably using his own spit and Cherry Blossom Polish on a warm spoon, into the filth and stagnant pestilence of what remained of the Whemley Canal. A source of diphtheria or cholera, perhaps. Might even be arsenic in the silt at the bottom. Tetanus bacteria on the sharp edges of rusted cans. Rats and leeches.

Tock winging his moustache with the back of a hand. "Better make sure, hadn't you?"

Insulted, Serge stood upright, his face saying that he was pulling rank, as he clacked the dog chain once, very sharply, to denote his considered opinion. "I think we've been had. Bit over the top to send for a team of frogmen, don't you think? False call out."

Mally sneered. What if it was a child in the sack after all, as reported? They seemed to have forgotten their initial brief, even if it was just a bag full of bobbling footballs bleeding air.

Why did he say it? "I'll wade in if you won't." If he got out on the other towpath he could be off that way through the parkland. Why not? Mally considered himself to having been in worse trouble than anything the water could offer. Coat off, he passed it to Tock with a telling wink. Then his watch which Tock pocketed.

Sliding in, he started wading, waist deep. Things trailing and dangerous wrapping themselves about cold legs as he made to where the sack now wriggled with an increased motion, just under the surface of water only to be described as a filthy, gritty, noxious, thick soup of bog slime with hanging weed, bottom filled with what Mally felt to be glass bottles and old tin cans under his boots. He kept his arms high because he had no wish to dunk his hands until it was absolutely necessary. Until he came to the floating, wriggling sack. There was nothing else for it but to get his hands wet. Concern already deepening. Something strong banging against his thigh. Feeling queasy now as he drew the moving sack close enough to lift it up and break the surface. That was when he felt the weight of a solid wriggling body mass with four limbs, a torso and a round shape which suddenly seemed to understand his presence and urge itself towards him. A wolf nightmare grabbing at his clothing with a sound like a gurgling drain as whatever was within fought to take in air.

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Fear such as he had never felt in his life before travelled like ball lightning through to his disbelieving brain, wiping out everything in its impact but the need to get this wriggling thing he had in the bag out of the water. Panic saw him attempt to hurry even as he felt the energy drain from his arms and legs. What could only be a human hand latched itself onto his T-shirt through the sacking, accompanied by a noise that bellowed like a fog horn of dragging sound, on and off, on and off, the sack draining of water. A drama unfolding in the beams of stage light.

The sack had a loop of string at the neck. Mally steeled himself to undo it. The wet string not separating freely, he had to tug, hearing cries from behind him. His brain heeding only his own volition.

It was as if he had opened up the catch on a jack-in-a-box, for suddenly the small gasping face covered in hanks of streaming hair and running with filthy water, sprang up before him, gasping for breath; a child's face; a girl's face, drawing air in deeply with a dragging panic. The fog horn of her struggle continuing...her mouth a big O. Dark, angry, pale coloured eyes as wide as a landed carp gaped back at him. Her face a thunder cloud; blaming Mally, as she flipped and bucked against his length to scramble as high up his frame as she could. Scrambling desperately to increase her grip on his clothing, rise above the water level completely, her shoes digging into his thighs as she raised herself upwards, her chin hard on the top of Mally's head.

Mally almost overwhelmed by the shock of her coming up and at him like that. Had she been a rampant weed and he an oak tree, she could have brought him down, given time enough. It was strength, not weakness that she had over him. Pandemonium going on behind him.

When she bit him, the pain came through cold, shocked numbness; her incisors cutting like hide punches into a layer of his scalp. Blame came upon him in the small hands that dragged at his hair, pulling so hard in her fury that he felt the roots tear away. As if he was her attempted murderer and not her saviour.

When she found the hand that attempted to stem the pain of his head Mally joined her banshee screaming. The sound of his cries cut her struggle dead. She had released his hair and scalp from between her biting teeth, transferring the incredible pain to the soft flesh of his hand between thumb and forefinger. He had to press his hand deeper against her teeth for her jaws to open and let his hand go. In that moment they looked at each other. Silver eyes into silver eyes reflecting the yellow torch light; a wizardly mingling of base metals which in Mally's impoverished breast and stunned mind, took on the lure of pure gold. The child was beautiful.

The pain remained like a baptism of fire as he carried her without

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faltering to the people waiting on the tow path. Never before had Mally Kenyon felt anything like this... a starburst of joy deep within his belly. Angels singing in his head. An incredible joy and happiness flowing through him, its warmth flowing through every vein, every capillary, through every hair follicle, his shortest whisker and the smallest flake of his skin. A joy of such proportion that stunned and enraptured him, taking his breath away. Even the wolf on the bridge forgotten. A change taking place created by a fountain of the sweetest, purest, most innocent pleasure. A gush more satisfying than any drug as he handed her up and over, then stayed in the water looking on the profile of the celestial cherub he had pulled from a cesspit.

The policewoman took the child into her arms, her face squashed to plainness with emotion. The torch she held up-lighting the brick arched roof of the bridge.

The dog chain jangled as it swung loose from the policeman's wrist. "This is the worst thing I have ever seen," he muttered deeply. "God strike dead the beast that has done this." The dog lead was shaking so much as it swung unattended from his trembling wrist that it jittered a sound like small, tuneless, musical bells.

In that moment the child wriggled out of her keeper's embrace, her breathing settling. As soon as her feet touched the cinders, she sank down onto the towpath, sitting on her haunches, hands hanging between her legs, fingers spreading flat, legs parted, silver eyes down to the dog handler's feet. The child shut down like a switch being flicked, retreating into herself, filthy dirty and dripping rancid water onto the cinder towpath. Her eyes moved to the clip end on the dog chain. She wore a red spotted dress, now blackened with the fetid silt from the canal water, the same colour as the blood pouring from Mally's head where she had bitten him. Her frilled socks blackened on legs running with the watery weeds she had dragged with her from her watery grave. Red leather shoes with buttoned fastenings totally ruined, like Mally's brown suede work boots would be.

Tock. "God almighty!"

The policewoman. "We'd better get her cleaned up and dry."

Mally. "Call an ambulance."

"No need. She can walk." The officer, gathering his dog chain in and depositing it into his pocket.

The policewoman, with children of her own, tried to lift the child again but she remained a solid, doubled shape on her folded haunches, staring at the pocket where the chain had been deposited.

Made incoherent...Mally having forgotten his intentions...they shared their looks of shocked fascination. Awe even. How long could this

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child have been in the water? It had to have been several minutes with five added on. Had she survived on a pocket of air until the sack had slowly filled with water and her body weight taken her under?

In the aftermath of shock there was anger on the faces of the officers, even a growing fear that they had very nearly left a child to drown. It had taken a villain like Mally Kenyon to save her. A man who now had tears to be denied as he looked over every inch of the child before him. It had been like seeing back in time to his own angry eyes in the mirror when she had bitten and beaten her way into his fortified heart. A fragile, sensitive boy, wanting only to be loved; a lone dog kicked and dragged through a hard, cruel life. In his confusion, she was he and he was she, but reborn of a hessian sack and he her deliverer. His shaking hands had been the hands that had caught her and brought her to safety; this child, a beautiful, magical, mystical changeling whose rebirth, as his own, had happened in the moment that she had sprung, like a sprite, into the deep, bottomless well of his unguarded feelings.

Mally, lowering his head to hide his tears, saw that the sack was draped against him, still. It contained something that had shared her boggy grave; something else that he might save. With his tumultuous feelings settling, he opened the sack and looked inside. The other victim was a rag doll. He drew it out wet and limp; a doll with orange hair and a freckled face, its clothes just as stained with the putrid canal water as his and the child's were.

He handed it over to the policeman, seeing that the bite mark on his hand was becoming a livid, red welt into which the indentation of her teeth was embedded like rosary beads. Mally had nothing to say because words failed him.

He would never, again, be the same.

Two

Mally and Tock had departed the dark canal bank, moonlight only offering a meagre illumination to the shapes and shades of blackness about her. It shone on the ruffled surface of the canal and the glass roofs of the greenhouses to the rear of the adult, female form which emerged from a gap in the hedges, just a short way from the bridge; a shapeless figure bringing with it a container on wheels, gripped onto tightly by the handle. A small suitcase swung at her side as the woman turned to look towards the bridge.

The van which now had the extra passenger in the form of a loudly shrieking child was quickly disappearing into the dark night. It had already made a U turn and driven away. There could be no doubt that the slow moving figure and its accoutrements which came to stand by the water's edge was following the sounds of its departure and watching the van's progress away towards the centre of the town. There could be only one way it was heading. Only one destination; the police station.

For those who might have seen her standing alone and forlorn on a canal towpath after midnight her clothing might have suggested her to be after a concealment of identity not usual to her daytime self. That such clothing was no different than the garments she always wore would only be known to those aware of her occasional venturings out of the front door of her Lower Quinton home. For Serena Collins was draped from head to toe in voluminous clothing; a head scarf concealing her face, her coat fastened from neck to knee and her sheepskin boots allowing not even a glimpse of her white, fragile skin. Her gloves were sheepskin mittens which worried now at her hidden face as she clutched the tissue she needed to stem her weeping eyes and runny nose as she looked about carefully with wide sweeps of her head, cowering into her clothing, a dark stain beginning to show through the pale wool of the scarf which had been tied about her head in a way to stand out from her cheeks and forehead. A hand reaching up to the place that had so recently smote the stony path as her handbag had been snatched by its strap from her thin shoulder and she had been propelled forward by the unexpected attack. The jolt, as she had hit the banking, had been severe enough to jar the breath from her body and cause her brain to rattle in her skull. Even as she stood recalling, with a sense of disbelief, what had happened, she felt disorientated, still. So filled with fear and shock that she felt physically ill. The dark, spreading stain on her headscarf was that of her own blood. She had been mugged. Yet far more had been lost than merely a handbag.

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Hard to think that only a few minutes previously, before being set upon, her intentions had still been as planned. Serena had just reached the bottom of the flight of brick steps down to the canal bank on the side which would allow a straight journey to the train station in the town centre when she had been so cruelly felled upon from behind. She had been so engaged in the carriage of a small suitcase in one hand and a cumbersome shopping trolley in the other, with her handbag suspended from its strap about her shoulder, that she had allowed herself to withdraw from the vigilance that might otherwise have kept her from trouble. Not usually out at so late an hour, she had considered herself to be unwatched, despite the drinkers still crowding the bar in the public house as she had passed by as unobtrusively as the trolley would allow, their sounds of laughter ringing in her ears as she made to come down the steps on the other side. She had guided it as carefully as she could because the trolley was heavy and its cargo precious. She had been so vastly tired, her muscles drained of energy. She had paused in her journey after bringing her burdens down the last of the rises in order to catch her breath, a pain in her side from the exertion. It had been then that the tall, strong assailant had struck her a brutal blow from behind. As if he had been lurking in the shadows of the bridge, waiting for some such opportunistic moment. A woman seemingly alone. Foolishly walking a canal bank late at night with a handbag and a shopping trolley and a small suitcase in which there could only be valuable things. As she had fallen the red bag had been snatched from her shoulder. The heavy trolley had stayed stubbornly upright while the suitcase had clattered against the brick wall and then become lost to the shadows.

For a moment, she had been stunned and disorientated. The need to protect her delicate skin causing her to pull the scarf further under her cheek as it had lain against the rough cinders. Shock could sometimes bring on a convulsion that would make her writhe for its short duration and while this did not happen, her fear of losing all consciousness took over from the fear that the man might rape her or continue an assault in a way that might reveal her identity. It had seemed so important not to be identified. He must not know her. Or look inside the trolley. Fear had coursed through her like forest fire. He must not take the trolley. Let him take the suitcase, instead. It was an exertion of massive proportion, just to speak. "Go, go," she had called, breathlessly, to her attacker. "There's money in my bag. Take the purse inside it. Over a hundred pounds in there. The suitcase has new clothes within. You will be able to sell them. Not the trolley. Please, not the trolley."

Anything rather than do what he did next. She had been unable to see his face, just his tall, gaunt frame, yellow lined with the faint ochre light

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coming down from the bridge lamps; a cruel, tight mouth, biting hard on clenched teeth. Fair hair hanging unkempt over an unshaven face which bristled with tiny silvery hairs as the light defined his silhouette. The smell of unwashed desperation. Dark, matt, suede builder's boots on his feet with steel toe caps; large feet with large boots covered in a pale powder, maybe cement or stone dust.

Then she had realised his intent. Hearing her own desperate voice, again. "Dear God, no!" she had cried, as his shaking hands, fingers work-worn, with nails bitten to the quick, deftly undid the buckle to Caitlin's hiding place. "No, please, no! Leave it," as he had pulled back the lid and put his hand to the hessian within.

The wriggling sack rose and his own shriek broke the sound of his heavy breathing. "God, a dog!" before he dropped it onto the ground, raising a foot as if he would kick it into the water which licked and lapped in the slimy ditch under the brick edge of the towpath.

"No! Not a dog...a child...a child...please, leave her."

His gasp had been admonishing. His face spread wide with a disgust that not even a man such as he could deny feeling. "A child...that's a child in there!" The sack abandoned, space made as he had backed away because the sack had taken on a small, human shape; crouched, hands feeling, head straining against the sacking; unmistakable.

All might have been well, save for what happened next. Caitlin taking up her leaping-frog position within the sack which had been tied with string to keep her in; a new skill, one she had practised in her daily games. Her agile body tense and then springing, froglike, as she sensed her own opportunity to escape. The splash had been enough to inform her jailer and their assailant that she had leapt the wrong way. She and her rag doll within the same sack had gone into the stinking, slimy water.

Even as he watched, the assailant had taken himself towards the bridge steps, walking backwards, knocking his heel against the suitcase as he went so that it took on the dust transferred from his boots, her red handbag clutched in his fist with the strap hanging, then turned to run as if being chased by a demon from Hell to the bridge above.

She had listened to his rapid footsteps as she had tried to struggle against the giddiness which threatened to take her into unconsciousness while the sack had thrashed with its thrusting contents, causing Serena to feel the splashes on her face as they bled through the thin wool of her scarf. The blow to her head, while not serious to someone of a stronger disposition, had been seriously disabling to a person as weakened and frail as she had become in recent months. Even so, she might have followed Caitlin into the water to try to save her except that a voice, which could

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only have been his, came deep and low, like a rumble of faraway thunder to her ears, as she lay stiffly on her side, unable to move, under the bridge arch. He was speaking from the parapet of the bridge above her. She could hear his words, clearly spoken; the last place she thought that he would call.

“Police? There’s a child under the water at Bridge Twenty-Eight of the Whemley Canal...by the Dog’s Bed Inn...under the bridge. Get here quick. This is not a crank call.”

She had had to crawl away, then, leaving the sack with its head still just proud of the water where she could only hope that it would stay, standing with stiff and painful difficulty, allowing the now empty trolley to give its assistance as she had dragged herself to her feet and made to find somewhere where she might think clearly, picking up the suitcase as she went.

While urgently searching for a place of seclusion amidst the vegetation and bushes to the side of the path she had looked back constantly, even as panic for her own exposure gripped her, seeing the rippling light rings which Caitlin’s thrashing arms and legs were making inside the sacking. No sound, as if she had been concentrating hard, trying to find something to grab which would keep her head above the greasy, black bog. Hearing the car coming and knowing its intention to stop on the bridge even before it did so; a blue light pulsing on the roof of the van which she saw travelling the street at great speed towards the bridge. A rescue vehicle on an empty, midnight, weekday road without other traffic. The sound of it stopping on screeching tyres filled her with even more anxiety as its blue light cancelled. A flashlight pouring over the canal banking, the beams failing to reach her hiding place. More doors clicking open, a dog whimpering; “Stay Timber. Guard the van.” Then to a companion, “Better get down there with the flashlight. You never know in a place like this.”

She had found her hiding place; through and behind a privet hedge, with her back to the side boarding of a garden shed, carefully bringing the trolley round to be hidden also, keeping a tight grip on the small suitcase, when the police van and then the policewoman had appeared, slowly to be followed by the others who had proceeded to do what she had been unable to do: to save little Caitlin from the result of her own mischief. How hard she had listened then, praying, tears beginning to swirl against her reddening lids. Stemming her cries of desperate anguish.

When she had looked back to the canal water, there was no outstanding shape to suggest that Caitlin was still above the water, alive and breathing, though she would know to hold her breath. Time so short

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since the call had been made. It was as if the police van had been waiting, close at hand, ready to be directed to the next troublesome place. The High Street, maybe. Police parked there, late at night, watching out for the men who would creep within the shadows of the backstreets, pressing themselves against rear gates and leaning on car door handles for those owned by people foolish enough to leave their property unprotected. Property, not people, that which mattered most. No protection down here where danger lurked on a nightly basis. Sometimes vagrants and druggies under the bridge. The place where the man had lain in wait. She should have known better than to come this way. Should have gone some other way. Only she had been more frightened of being stopped by a policeman seeing her walk the darkened streets. Wanting to look inside her trolley when she would have represented an unusual sight as she wandered the pavements of Quinton at gone midnight.

She had been going to catch the night train west, you see. The one that might have served her best with its empty carriages and few people to question why a disfigured woman with a small child might choose to travel into the leafy countryside of Shropshire before the morning light. The fewer to see, the better, CC had said. Though he might have driven them in his car had CC been a man with consideration for others. A man to know his responsibilities. A man decent enough in his heart and mind to know that Serena was doing only that which was best for all of them. She should have realised her own vulnerability in a place which had a reputation for harbouring the criminals who would think nothing of preying upon a weak and disabled woman walking alone. The kind of man who had thought nothing of striking her hard and pushing her down. Yet one who even in his depravity would be so repulsed by little Caitlin's mode of travel that he would drop her like a hot stone and call the police to have her saved from her own naughty foolishness.

Was it the same man who had attacked her? He who had accompanied the police down the bridge steps, followed by Tock Bartlett, the landlord of the Dog's Bed Inn? She could not recall sufficiently the detail of his appearance to make a sure identification, over the distance, though he looked to be both similar and familiar. Maybe, maybe not. If it was the same man, he would not fear her, now, as much as she should fear him. He might uncover her identity from the contents of her handbag if it was the same man and he of a will to hand the handbag over. Bills with her address at the top; a diary, the school papers, her purse, her crucifix. Not worn today because she did not want to feel that she was asking unfairly of Him. As she had removed it to place it in the handbag, it had been like breaking her connection with the Master of all things. He would not hear.

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He would not see. He would be looking elsewhere. At the same time thinking that if she had asked, He might have allowed her to do this last thing for Caitlin...to get her away safely to a different world...a different life...to her inclusion instead of her separation. That was what Caitlin had failed to understand. The rejection was for her own sake, now that she, Serena, was ill. Now that she was dying. Now that soon she would be gone.

Now, her silhouette moved slowly as her head dipped low, a hand rising to put a tissue up to wipe a running nose, once again. From the same gap, pulling to her side in her free hand, the large, reinforced, shopping trolley on small, sturdy wheels which had been Caitlin's carriage just a few short minutes ago. A carriage that, hitherto, had always carried her safely with restraint, to avoid her presence being known. Looking out through the eye from within, as long as she was quiet. As long as she was still.

Now, silently, she manoeuvred the carriage on its small wheels, this way and that, making criss-cross patterns in the cinders, same as those when she had positioned the carriage at the bottom of the bridge steps, before the attack. An innocent looking carrier for heavy goods; darkly plaid in the ochre light from the bridge lamps, moving upright without noise, until it was tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees, ready to be dragged from behind using the handle which she gripped onto tightly in shaking fingers, crying softly into the scarf about her face.

Sounds like the flaps of rough linen were laid over the soft, dark velvet of the night as her own whispering voice cut through the dark quiet. Now the place where Caitlin had leapt was without movement; the discarded rubbish still standing proud of a glistening slick. "Dear God, in your goodness, help me, please! Hail Mary, mother of God, help me, please!" Head bowed, words sincere, she staggered slightly as if her knees were about to give way, the mud on her legs and sheepskin boots and down the front of her woollen coat, seeping through her outer clothing to her skin beneath. From out of a mouth wrapped up within the folds of the enveloping, woollen scarf, a short, sharp breath picked a frayed edge into the mantle of restored peace. A short walk and the bridge swallowed the silhouette up like a dark mouth before it could be seen again under the ochre lights of the bridge above.

Raising the now lightweight trolley up in one hand, the suitcase in the other, she made a quiet ascent up the bridge steps. There was no other way in which to attain the opposite towpath, after the bridge, on the Lower Quinton side, the illumination from the tall lamps casting its yellow outlines over her silhouette but keeping secrets, still.

At the top of the steps, she crossed the road bridge over the canal

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to the other side of the parapet, stopping only to look at the forms of the two men drinking tots of whisky at the bar, seen through the windows of the Dog's Bed Inn, one of them draped in the landlord's jacket. Serena recognised it, eyes under the low brim of her enveloping scarf narrowing with a long familiarity when he was not a man to be constantly changing a comfortable old coat for a different one. Tock Bartlett, a man of good reputation. Magdalene Kenyon's father, pouring from a full bottle instead of his optics, and winging his moustache with a flicking hand as the two men talked, heads close together, otherwise the pub deserted and in darkness.

Her head tilted in thought of the other man. Was he her assailant as well as the same man who had brought little Caitlin from the water? Mally Kenyon! She recognised him, now, too. Knew all of the Kenyon tribe by sight because they were distant relatives, yet not to be acknowledged because of the social divide. Cousins of cousins, these days, but all sharing branches of familial connection from the same Quinton root. Such was why her sister dare not allow her Quinton connections to become common knowledge. That, and Serena's gross deformity, of course. A matter of family shame. Catty had never been able to embrace Serena's ugly oddity. The obscenity of her face, indecent in its mutation from the regular features of the human form, perhaps because it heralded a genetic cause. Catty had always feared the recessive genes of abnormality which had rendered her sister a human curiosity from birth. It was within the human condition, was it not, to require perfection? Catty was perfection. Catty was all that Serena was not. Clever, suave, sophisticated and beautiful. Powerful, too; a woman who had dedicated her life to her own ambition, while Serena had been incarcerated within the parental home, hidden under veils. Too ugly to be looked upon. 'Poor Serena,' they said. How Serena hated their pity for the undeserved afflictions she must suffer. Keeping the anger trapped within. A reason, perhaps, for the rampant disease which had now invaded and was sapping at her strength, taking all her vitality for itself, feeding upon her like the parasite it was. Serena feeling the old, lonely, bitter anger, now, as she worried for Caitlin whose physical beauty was that of an angel so narrowly escaped from her recall to Heaven, itself. For what should have been her sister's child, fate had passed over to Serena. Little Caitlin; an aborted foetus, banging her tiny, finger-sized arm against the side of the galvanised metal pail where she had curled with the afterbirth, still attached by the cord of life, her heart beating and her breath pulsing in her tiny doll sized chest. Refusing to die, just as Serena had refused to die, when all had said that it would have been for the better had she, herself, failed to thrive. Little Caitlin

who, because of the man on the barstool inside the Dog's Bed Inn, lived on, in a different place than Serena had intended her to be. Blackstone School was where Serena had intended Caitlin to be. Now she would be at the police station in Quinton. Dear God! Just to think of her being so close to Catty was unbearable. Something would have to be done! Her sister being none other than the Chief Constable of Quinton Dales and District Police yet entirely unaware that the child now being taken into their care was, in fact, her own daughter...the child she had never wanted but which Serena had secretly kept. Happily so, until to continue had become an impossible wish. Caitlin had, in recent months, become so very naughty and difficult to contain.

Under the bridge lamps was where she found the mobile from her pocket. She scrolled to find the number so very rarely used. Little point when, as expected, her whispered explanations and pleas for help were refused. As she had known they would be with CC, in his self indulgence, drunk or sober. What use was a drunken man at any time, let alone one such as this? Incapable in his intoxication of understanding the dreadful predicament they were in. For his name, as well as Serena's, were on the forms she had been taking with her to Blackstone School. C. C. Watson named as Caitlin's father. For once Serena's illness took its toll, someone would have to accept responsibility for her. Though, maybe, that might happen now, sooner, rather than later!

Unless, there was something to be done! Surely, something might be done to get little Caitlin back before she could go look for *the lady with the golden trumpet*. It had been Caitlin's way of giving Catty a name other than *mother*, a name so apt when it described Katrina Collins perfectly, to Serena's mind. A name that only a child could invent with such accurate information for Catty was in all ways *the lady with the golden trumpet*; a woman blessed with a big voice and such self importance!

Taking the most direct route homeward now meant going down the steps on the other side of the bridge to gain the alternated towpath which led to the gate to the playing fields and the pathways to Lower Quinton. As she went, Serena kept her head down in collusion with her thoughts, dragging the rumbling trolley over uneven, root infested pathways in the night dark of a park where tree boughs whipped newly laden branches in harmony with the gathering wind, its whistling music playing loudly, tossing notes of sound as the branches swung close to her bowed head, as if she was walking up and down the crochets and quavers of the same sheet of music; tragic and sweeping and wild like her feelings. So impossibly fearful that she felt as if her heart was about to shatter from its crescendos as she walked around the reed-filled lake. At its

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circumference, shining yellowish silver in the moonlight, like a giant, on-looking eye with its island centre as dark as a distended pupil beyond which lies the knowing mind.

Within the centre was the reed-filled place, where a pair of nesting, white swans might yet come again with the summer. Serena had a desperate hope in her heart that they would return. For this place had been where they had known the cruelty of those who would come to run them through with spears, kill their signet, and drive them to live in fear within the reeds and bracken of the island. Serena had seen them rise before the moon and spread their long necks against the winds which would carry them on their painful journey to some other place. A symbol of hope in the midst of despair for they had survived despite their broken wings. Within her mind, she was as one with them, now, as she watched the buffeting wind scud the bright waters of the mere under the sweeping oars of the sailing moon. For this had been the place where her own end had started. For here was the bandstand, over to the far right of the parkland, where the bandsmen came to play on lazy, late summer days just before the swans departed. This place where, in her foolishness, Serena had revealed to Caitlin the true facts of her birth as Catty had played upon her beautiful golden trumpet and the seeds of change had been planted in little Caitlin's head. "Caitlin! Caitlin!" Some things, once done, can never be undone.

Her home was but a short walk from the gates of the old, derelict park. Across from the park railings, on the opposite side of the street. A house mid-row of a terrace where now the lights of evening had been turned off, all in darkness and the drapes at upper windows drawn.

Serena let herself into her home using the key from under a plant pot. Her own lights were not switched on until after her downstairs curtains had been drawn. Such rules being those that had governed her own childhood as well as Caitlin's. No one must see in as she disrobed and then went below to the place where so much joy and happiness had been won and was, now, cruelly lost unless some way might be found to avoid the inevitable. What must be avoided, at all cost, was her sister finding out.

It was within the same street, some thirty minutes after the attack, no lights apparent, now, in her house; the street in darkness save for the streetlamps, that her attacker stood by her gate with a damp, used paper tissue in his hand. With him, a large, stocky, Bull Mastiff shared the lead which passed between them. It sat, now that its task was done, to denote that the scent which the dog had followed was within. The squat, grey, muscle-bound, short-haired dog had followed her home, using the scent from a dropped tissue, bringing its master with it. It panted on a hunger

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pain in its belly with its tongue lolling out as its owner considered his thoughts, noted details of the house, looked up at the curtain-less, boarded-up, upstairs windows and the general air of poverty to be seen in a once proud street. The man noted her address as 34, Park Road, Lower Quinton. In his pocket were her money and the crucifix. He had stashed the handbag with its bulk of papers in the waste bin behind the Dog's Bed Inn; papers within that might, now, tell him who she was and just what it was had prevented her from waiting upon the arrival of the police. Strange behaviour under the circumstances. The woman had something to hide.

As it was, behind the boarded-up bedroom windows, while ignorant of having been followed home, Serena Collins hardly slept.