

THE GHOST WRITER

CHAPTER 1

She was a ghost. Edgar knew that by looking at her. Not that she looked different, he couldn't see through her and certainly she was no white sheeted apparition, but she was one of the many that haunted him.

She was young, perhaps sixteen or so, dark curling shoulder length hair. Not especially beautiful, but with the attractiveness that youth bestows on all but the most unlucky. Short, maybe five feet two, and slightly, just very slightly, plump. So, nothing that held her out from any of the people who walked through the park each day as he sat on his bench.

It was the sum of many tiny things that led to the knowledge that she was one of them. It wasn't in the way she stood alone, though they always did. Here, on this late November morning, there was more than one young woman walking without company in the park, and he did not doubt their humanity. There was the way she stood, stiff and upright with a stillness, a depth, which seemed to suggest some effort. It was as though she had always to remind herself to be. And, in the way of these things, there was a third element. It was her way of looking. She seemed to be gazing out through the world, as if she did not see what others saw, or they didn't see what she did.

He noted it now. A dog, chasing up the expanse of grass, following a ball tossed by an obedient owner, ran by, just a few feet distant from her. Hard to avoid being drawn in by such joyful, simple, energy. Yet, the scene passed her by as if it were no more than another autumn leaf dropping from a tree. The dog, he noticed, ignored her, not just ignored, but, to the extent

that he could tell, seemed oblivious to her. This, he was sure was the fate of ghosts, to be unseen by all but the few.

The realization that he was being haunted had come only slowly to Edgar, but now he was always on the lookout for them. Had he still been working, then he doubted he would have realised. He needed the time for observation, for contemplation, time to develop his ability to see beyond the distracting surface of the world, and into its depths. Then he had begun to see. This girl, the young boy who would run from one side of the park to another with a determination that suggested his very existence depended on it. And others, often lingering further in the background, in the shadows of trees or even glimpsed, sitting on passing buses. The only thing they had in common, for a certainty, was their awareness of him, their focus on him. So far, they had made no attempt to talk to him, they seemed, not content, but constrained, as if they were held back in some way. It was as if they knew some secret which they were not ready to share. Perhaps they waited on him, felt that they owed him his time before they came to him.

That was it. There was an expectation in their gazes, a weight, a demand. As a bubble that rises from the depths, the idea blossomed. He saw a common thread that joined each of the ghosts. They longed for something which they could not ask for, and somehow, perhaps, had come to believe that he might offer it to them.

Today he would find out. He would take that step, to 'unpathed waters, undreamed shores', he thought to himself. Let Shakespeare be my guide. He rose from the park bench, stiffly but without pain. At his age the first was omnipresent and the latter a regular companion, which

today had left him. He buttoned his grey coat and adjusted his hat. He did not have a great deal of experience with young ladies, or indeed women of any sort, but felt he needed to maintain an air of respectability.

She was standing above him on a slight rise, as if gazing over the park. The dog had retrieved its ball and returned it to the thrower, a middle-aged lady who would undoubtedly come to the young girl's aid if called on. Despite his prior certainty, a doubt crept in. Walking slowly, but with a degree of purpose he hoped might be apparent, he made his way up the small slope.

He saw a tension in her, saw her stance change, she became somehow more real. It was as if she had been sketched on the path before, but as he approached, she gained something from his attention, as if his very act of looking at her, made her real. Then he stopped. Was he mad? Was this all some figment of his imagination? A lonely old man living out his last days and building a world of strangers who saw in him some redemption? Was that not the very essence of delusion? Yes, Delusion at best, paranoia at worst. He altered his step, changed his mind and his direction, now to pass by her. A wave of relief and disappointment swept through him.

As he drew level with her, he heard her draw in a breath, as if to speak. But nothing came. He began to pass. "Achoo" He heard, and in his peripheral vision saw her reach for a handkerchief. Only now did he note the long coat she wore, harping back to days of older fashions, but ones which always came around again.

Instinctively he called out “Bless you!” Still walking.

“Why, thank you, sir”. Such a strange, anachronistic reply. He thought for a moment she was being sarcastic, but there was no trace of that in her voice. He stopped, turned round to face her. He was sure he was right. Yet, as she stood there, still he doubted. ‘What’s brave, what’s noble?’ he thought.

“I, think maybe I have seen you before in this park? It is one of my favourite places in London.”

The words stilted, uncertain, he had not planned this, but then how do you start a discussion with a ghost?

She turned to him now, yet seemed to be speaking through him, as if he were further away, or she not entirely there. Her voice soft, almost dreamy, but moving into focus as she spoke.

“I, I come here, or places very similar, with my sisters, who are not here today”. She seemed slightly confused by their absence, as if noting it for the first time.

Edgar was surprised, he had never seen her with anyone else, genuine interest came to him.

“Oh really! Such a stilted way of talking, yet it seemed right for this girl who did not seem to be of the twenty first century, let alone 2015. He continued, sliding into the conversation with the care of a surgeon. “Forgive me, but I have not seen you with any other ... young ladies.”

She coloured, and for a moment he again wondered at the absurdity of her being a ghost.

“Sir, I would hardly venture out without a chaperone...yet...” She trailed off.” Yet, here I am...”

She stumbled to a stop, confused perhaps. Whilst he was sure she had been waiting for him, now it seemed as though she did not know what to do, lacked experience not just of the situation but of the world.

“Forgive me.” He repeated. “I, that is, I, I think there is something you want of me... that is, to ask me.” This was so much harder than he had expected. Again, he thought to move away. She frowned for a moment, looking at him, he sensed in a her struggle, her uncertainty, at last she stammered out, almost to herself.

“Oh dear, it is true, that is, oh, I don’t know. Lydia always says that I am ignorant, and...and vain, but who could help it, given...given how my life has been written so far. But, but, I have come here, that is hardly idle is it? And surely it is brave of me.” With each consideration she grew in strength.

The words, half spoken to him, half to herself. He tried to follow their flow, but the stream meandered, he urged it on.

“I am sure it isn’t idle, Lydia, your sister?” He guessed. “Do you have many sisters?”

She brightened, as if her doubts were not forgotten, but never existed. Energy and animation came to her, as if the very idea of her family had made her more real.

“Lydia is my favourite, but there is Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary. Jane is making an exceptionally good marriage, and Elizabeth, Elizabeth is getting married to that horrible Mr Darcy, quite what she sees in him I do not understand”. Another flood, but washing away, rather than clouding.

The words ran through him, he looked at her again. Truly looked. Her coat was old fashioned, but not old. Beneath he could see a long dress, surely, she had not looked like this before? Was this some strange prank she was playing? But no, he did not think so. And even if it were, he would play along, he needed to know where this path led.

“Are you?” He paused, and smiled, as if playing along with a joke. He thought of that party game where players hold a name against their foreheads. “I think I know your family, you must be.” A final pause, then, he said it. “You must be, Miss Catherine Bennet, of Longbourn, perhaps one day I might have the honour to call you Kitty?” His voice suggested that perhaps he was just joking, but he looked her direct in the eyes as he spoke. Wanting it to be true, but fearing it was.

She dimpled, clearly pleased to be recognised. Some reserve in her gave way. Then, with no trace of irony continued, clapping her hands a little as she did. “See, see I was right I knew you would know, would be able to help, that is ... Well of course you can, you will, you must, you will, won’t you? Don’t I deserve it?” Another gush of words.

“I, well, I will do anything I can to help a young lady in distress, of course”. What else could he say? he thought.

“Wonderful, wonderful, I knew you would.” She almost jumped up, and for a moment he thought she was going to kiss him on the cheek. He stopped the idea with a step back, and a dash of reality into this unreal situation.

“But, but what is it I can do for you?”

“Well sir, isn’t it obvious?” She looked at him, spun round, arms outstretched, showing herself to him, focussing his attention on her.

“I am trapped sir, trapped as I am. That dreadful Jane Austen has imprisoned me with a pastor, whose name I do not even know! I am left as a foot note. I, I a footnote, a nobody. I need you; I need you to write me a future. You are the only one who can do it.” She stared at him, defiant and alive, and a ghost.

CHAPTER 2

She didn't look like a killer, thought Darren Thompson, and he had met a few. He knew it was a ridiculous thing to generalise about, but as a psychiatrist he'd made a career of moving from the general to the specific, take a patient with general symptoms, and develop a specific diagnosis.

But Jacqueline Moran did not look like a killer. She looked, defeated. She was, he checked his memory, she was twenty-five, only just, yet she looked ten years older. Her skin was pale, almost grey, her dark hair was cut short, the remains of a crew-cut or perhaps having been totally shaved off. He had the vaguest feeling that he should know her, but the hacked hair, the pale face and dark eyes, perhaps few would know her in this distressed state.

There were dark rings below her brown eyes, and her lips were drawn tight and bloodless. She sat in a chair, she had arranged herself, he could think of no better description, with her feet on the seat and knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her long legs. She wore blue drain-pipe jeans and a baggy sweatshirt with a heart and a large apple on it. Though they were old, there was something about their quality that said 'designer'.

They were sitting in one of the larger consulting rooms at the centre, big enough to avoid any feeling of being boxed in, small enough though to have some feeling of intimacy. Outside, through thick windows, a small high walled garden, neat lawns and a path. Inside, muted colours, a low table between them, bland pictures on the wall, all designed to be non-threatening. Muted sounds of the residents, occasional cries and the clatter of medicine trolleys. There was not though, that institutional smell. In here a silent electronic device pumped calming sandalwood into the room at regular intervals.

She looked at him, she guessed him, fifty, already greying, slight paunch, horn rimmed glasses and casual clothes of blue shirt, jumper, and corduroy trousers. He hoped he too looked harmless, he returned her stare with his best disarming smile.

“How are you this morning?” He taught one day a week at the local university, and he had warned his pupils on many occasions that they must keep their opening questions short and simple, undirected. Yet even in these few words, he realised he might have broken his own rule.

‘This morning’ he had said, ‘This morning’, after the day before, and indeed the day before that. He sighed inwardly and swore at himself. Yesterday had been a disaster, and he needed to get to the bottom of it. And that would only be the start of their journey together.

She continued to stare, as if bringing herself into the now. Again, he saw that sense of defeat. There was not wariness. She was not calculating what to say, not sifting her answers to see what dust she could find to throw in his eyes. She was searching within herself. She came to a conclusion, an awareness. She spoke low and quiet, distant, as though on the phone to a

helpline, talking to someone who knew that right now the caller just needed someone to listen to them.

“Once, in LA, I had a friend. A good friend, or as good as they get in that shitty.” He noted her pun.

“He’d started the night with some Coke and had been drinking the time away. Then, he got into a stupid argument with this girl he was with at the time. Small stuff, she’d been eyeing someone else, or he had. Anyway, he just turns and walks out of the bar, out through the fire escape.”

The words are flat and sparse, but with a small emphasis here, a slight inclination of the head there, a point with her shoulder towards the fire escape, he can almost see the bar. He feels that she is sketching, that if she wished to, she could paint the scene with her words and he would be there. “This radar went off in my head, I’d seen that sort of thing before. Seen people taken to the edge by the stuff they’d put in their bodies, how they could switch from light to dark, like that.” She clicked her fingers. “His girl had turned away, forgotten him, but I’ve got this feeling in my gut. So, well, I’m a little wasted too, but I go after him. Through the door and up the stairs. Out from the big bright noises and into the mumble of it in the passageway, away from the smell of life and into that lingering scent of decay.” He feels himself, he was right, he is there, she continues. “I slipped as I went and smacked my face, got up and chased after him, wiping blood and snot.”

She sniffs, and Darren almost reaches for a handkerchief to wipe away the blood. There is a soft drawl in her voice as she continues her story. “The fire-exit door to the roof banged shut

as I went up, the clang echoed in my chest, and inside I can feel this big fear growing. Like, like that alien film, you know, when it bursts out of that guy's chest? It's like that. And, suddenly, it's like this is down to me. I saw what was going to happen, and it's down to me to stop it." Still her delivery is flat, but like a swamp has pulled him in.

Darren nods his head, he's not sure where this is going, but he's happy to have her talking.

"I get to the top, nearly sick, and the pain in my face is burning now. I bash the door, and nearly go flying again as it bursts open." She pauses again, as if drawing in a breath from having run up the stairs. And he catches a tiny pant in her voice, she's either acting this out, or remembering, or just a great storyteller.

"So, I'm out in the hot LA night, never cool there, and I can smell the flat smell of smog, and in the distance are cars and laughter, and it's all normal. But he's not there, no sign. An empty roof top. Oh, some air-con stuff, you know, and a big sign for the club, but not of him." Another pun, has she told this story before? Darren wonders. "I ran to the edge of the roof. Now I'm calling out his name, and I know, absolutely know, that when I look over that roof, I'm going to see him crashed and broken below. I know that had I been quicker, had I called, we'd be in the bar drinking and singing away on the Karaoke. I just know."

She stops again. She's reached the end, but not, he thinks, the point. "You asked how I feel. I feel like I did then, like the shit has gone down, and I was the one who could have stopped it. Like it's a weight that I'll have to drag along forever. Like that Marley guy, you know, Scrooge's partner." He nods, jots down "Dickens! – reader? on his pad. "Yeah, I feel like I've a fucking Marley ton of crap dragging me down, that's how I feel."

Darren remembers to breathe. The images she has drawn are deep and rich, he was there on the roof, he feared to see the body. But he notices that she has shifted from the specific to the general. This too is something he tells his students to look out for, it is a deflection.

“And where was the boy, behind the HVAC, throwing up, passed out?” He asks. She looks at him again, like this is the first time she has really seen him. He has broken a tiny chink in her armour. Maybe a little early, but with what happened, he needs to start the process as soon as possible.

“Hah,” for the first time there is the merest hint of a smile, here and gone, like the true her had risked peaking over the barriers. “Yeah, he was round the back pissing. But that doesn’t change how I felt, or how I feel, I own my feelings”. A second alarm rang in Darren’s mind. She had, he remembered, been in more than one rehab centre. That, “I own my feelings” mantra had value, but had to be used carefully. Time to change tack.

“So, why do you think you are here, with me, right now?”. He moved through the general to the specific with precision and speed.

“Right now? Here?” She shrank back into her shell, drew a deep breath. Then two more. Again he saw a learned tool, a coping mechanism. There was hope here he thought. Tears came to her eyes. She hugged herself a little closer. He could sense the recitation within her, probably some Nietzsche crap about being made stronger if you didn’t die. Eventually, in a voice that indeed spoke of a weight to carry, and miles to go before she slept, she said.

“Because of that man yesterday, the one I threw off the stairwell; is he ok?”

CHAPTER 3

Edgar was back at his flat, from the park to here never took long. He stood now at the grey anonymous door, its surface broken only by the letter box, and the single silver disk of the lock. He breathed deeply. Head tilted, then turned to place his ear to the door, pressed against it. Listening, willing himself to hear, and to not hear. Tension built in his chest. Still he waited, key poised.

Sometimes that was when the sounds would start, or stop. He waited, ears alert for the faintest of scratching. Nothing. Not now, not right now. Perhaps, he hoped vaguely and without any real justification, things had changed with the appearance of Miss Bennet? Yet, he did feel something had changed in him, or around him. He pushed the key into the lock, it slid smoothly, turned gently, the quietest of snick sounds. One last breath, push of the door, and he entered.

Nothing. No sounds, no quiet mutterings of rebuke and challenge. Just the silence, and maybe a car in the distance, the sounds of birds in a tree.

As always, the first sight to greet him is the shelves lining the hallway, holding the corpses of his life, and work, and dreams. Stacked like sentinels, tattered guards, flimsy decaying soldiers. Envelopes and small packages, some tied with string, some with sticking tape. Some torn open, others slit with care. From those that were open, sheets of paper with neat typing could sometimes be seen. Mostly they were ranked tidily, but some showed signs of having been pulled down, and in dragging others with them. The hallway was lined with the shelves and each shelf filled with envelopes, or files, or pages bound with red linen tape, never having

left his home. The shelves extended into the one living room, and to his bedroom. Walls of brown and grey, walls uneven and seemingly unending. The deep strata of his life, exposed and crumbling. Some layers marked success and almost triumph, some disaster and disappointment, and he never could treat those two imposters the same. Still others recorded a failure of will.

Closing the front door, he turned to look into the wire basket that would catch any post that arrived. Today he saw it was the Cheater Letters. He thought of them as such. The letters which looked like they might contain news of great import, of promises of the success he had searched for for all his life. Three of them, type written, personally addressed, each which might be delivering a whole new world to him. Despite his certainty that there was nothing in them but dreams conjured by marketing teams far away, he opened them with a certain reverence. In case, just in case. If one of these envelopes did contain an Acceptance, he wanted to be able to recount the moment, to smile at the interviewer and laugh self mockingly. But they were as he had known, and he dropped them into the bin by the door. Such a long time since they had been different, and who to blame?

Down the hall into his living room. It is sparsely furnished, the main item being his writing desk and chair. He sat down at the desk, relaxed. Despite it all, despite everything, sitting at the desk still opened a door to hope, a feeling that this time would be the new beginning.

His thoughts returned to the meeting with Catherine Bennet. That the meeting was extraordinary was obvious, but the ways in which it was extraordinary were what claimed his attention. He recalled their discussion again.

She had taken his arm and allowed him to begin to walk with her. As they walked, the park seemed to vanish, he could not remember the path they had taken. "Sir, I have resolved to be more like Lydia, always they say that she is the impulsive one. Well, I think it is bravery, bravery she has been given, and bravery I can take because I admire it in her, in truth there is much to admire in Lydia." He saw her how thoughts rushed ahead of her, and how her words chased after them. "Sir, I am not who I wish to be, which I am sure is the fate of many people. But you see, those people it is their own fault. I do not mean to forget Christian charity and forgiveness, but they have only themselves to blame for their fate in life. But I sir, I was written as I am, my past is but a few short lines and my future is marriage to a clergyman whose name no one even remembers! Sir, I am a footnote, a..." she shuddered, "...a general knowledge question, that is all I am...can that be right?"

He had listened, how could he not? They had walked around the park. He sensed in her the struggle between what she was fated to be, written to be, and the strange fact of her existence. Of the new desires which, almost by never having been written, should not be part of her. As she talked, the light began to fade, but she seemed not to notice, as if she saw a different world to his.

"But how can this be?" He had asked at one point.

"Mr Johnson, I know not. But my lack of knowledge about many things is very great, and I am sure that my ignorance is no impediment at all to their existence. Why, I am sure that elephants and the czars of Russia very happily continued living their daily lives whilst I knew nothing of them!" It was, he reflected, a good argument even if it somewhat missed the point.

Yet, getting to any point seemed difficult for Catherine Bennet, and he struggled to see what she wanted of him.

“Mr Johnson, Edgar. You know of my sister Lydia and Mr Wickham?” He had nodded. “You know that after she left, for many years, they would travel the country, running up debts and behaving in the most scandalous of ways?” Her voice raised, but not with censure, almost with envy he thought. He had nodded again. “They lived on! They lived in the imaginations of writers and readers. But I, I, I am a full stop Mr Johnson; I am merely noted to have ‘married a clergyman in Pembury’. The sarcasm in her voice, the anger and loathing, seemed to come from a soul much older than Catherine’s eighteen years. But then, he reflected, in many ways she was at least three hundred years old.

“That sir is my final sentence, and indeed it is my life sentence, which would be a delightful play on words if it were not so true”. Despite her angst he could see her childlike pleasure in this sally.

“But Miss Bennet, Catherine, what is it you want of me? He had asked for the tenth time.

“Mr Johnson, have I not said it? Have I not been clear? I want my life, after I married a clergyman. I want my scandals, my adventures, I want to find my place in the imagination of the world. And I need you to write it for me!”

And with that, she had turned, as if hearing a call. “It is Lydia. Today we are off to meet Mr Wickham for the first time, again, and again her adventure begins. You must begin mine”.

And she had gone, had turned as if edgewise, and vanished. And he had returned, the brightness of her life receding and clouded by his own. He turned back to his desk, his computer was there, his paper was there. They always were. He felt his hand poised above the keyboard, ready. No, he wouldn't write yet. There were mysteries here and leaving the fact of her existence to one side, the bigger question was, why him?

As if on cue something rustled in the shelves, like the scurrying of a rat, its claw sounds scratching across his thoughts. "Failure...you failure...worthless no talent..." The voices began to chatter, he placed his hands on his ears, and tried to focus.

CHAPTER 4

"So, next, Ms Jacqueline Moran. Darwin Ward". Darren Thompson called the case meeting back to order, and the group around the table turned to the notes in front of them, a shuffling and clicking of pens for notes.

"Jacqueline Katherine Moran, Dr Thompson." A voice corrected him, he looked up from the notes at Cheryl Turner, lead caseworker, who had spoken up. "Ah, yes, thank-you, and whilst we're setting records straight, perhaps you could clarify exactly what happened the day before yesterday?" His slight emphasis on 'you' and 'exactly', managing to imply that she wouldn't know, but should.

"Well, as you know, the Health and Safety Executive are still interviewing staff, and reviewing records, until they report it would be wrong to say anything." As a caseworker Cheryl Turner had had a great deal of experience ducking issues and awaiting formal reports. Her tight smile and shrewd dark look hid what was, in reality, someone who felt her role was a vocation.

“I see, so whilst the H&SE are pondering whether there is a need to bring charges against someone in our care, or criminal negligence charges against some of our staff, there is little we can do other than our jobs. Might I remind everybody, Ms Moran doesn’t really know what happened, which is not too surprising given her state then, and the sedatives.” Thompson managed to convey annoyance, sarcasm and finally pragmatism in a single sentence, a feat they all recognised, and some were impressed by.

In addition to his feelings about the situation, there is a world of inference here. If Katie Moran threw a patient over some stair banisters then that is one thing. If staff carelessness caused what would then have to be a tragic accident, that is another. Either way, his slight sarcasm and implied censure of the hospital as a whole sets the tone. Then he moves on. “Mrs Turner, remind us of Ms Moran’s history, why and when admitted etc”

“Of course. Jacqueline...K.. Moran, d of b, 21st June 1980, twenty-five, unmarried, no children that we are aware of. Was brought into us by a”, pause, “a Mr G. Townsend, who is apparently a junior solicitor for a major London law firm.” Her tone rising. “It seems the firm act as trustees for a fund in her name. He said he knew little about her.” Another pause. “The referring physician was ... Sir Stephen Taylor”, tone rising a second time, “And apparently files are on their way to us.”

She paused a final time. She certainly had their attention. There was nothing routine here, not least the involvement of Sir Stephen Taylor, renowned ‘psychiatrist to the stars and royalty, a psychiatric superstar in his own right. She continued.

“It was a Place of Safety referral, but it’s not clear from these notes what raised the concern, or why Sir Stephen would be involved. Apart from how disoriented she was when she arrived, and her borderline depressive behaviour, she seems ... functioning.” She reviewed the notes further, talking both from memory and from what she read.

“When Ms Moran arrived, it was clear that she was still under the influence of what laboratory tests have determined were,” Pause, ‘High levels of alcohol and cocaine, amphetamines and possibly marijuana.’ A voice from further down the table interjected, “The numbers are in the files.” Sharon Bell, Ward Sister. There was some paper shuffling as the three others, Ward sister, Site Director, and Nursing Head, glanced at the figures, then looked back.

“Any immediate concerns?” Darren Thompson again. “Suicide? Withdrawal?” Still driving the meeting, this is such a routine process now, Ms Moran is in the machine, for good or ill.

“None we were advised of. But because of the Place of safety referral, she was put on a four-hour watch, to be fair, for most of the time she was out of it.”

“Until she got out of what should have been a secure room, and was involved in the death of one of our other guests?” Darren Thompson is like a dog worrying a bone.

“Dr Thompson! This is doing us no good, we are all aware of the issues, but need now to focus on this young lady.” Ward Sister Bell could play a straight bat when she needed to. Thompson

sighed, she was right, there was something about Katie Moran that seemed to be getting to him.

“Very well, as you say, let us continue”. Not an apology, but some contrition, maybe.

Mary Bell continued. “Thank -you. The thing is, another thing is, really, aside from being under the influence of drugs and alcohol, we have seen no reason for her to be here.”

“Yet, here she is. Someone with money and connections was able to get her into one of the country’s top mental health clinics at very short notice.” Thompson, almost talking to himself now. Then, more loudly, as if shaking the uncertainties from his mind to get to what he could deal with. “So? Ward reports, initial observations?” They went around the table, happy to be back to the more typical routine of Case Review.

“Disorientated and uncertain when she arrived, seems calm now, compliant ... but there’s something.” Jane Donovan, Head of Nursing, glancing at her own notes. They looked at her, she continued.

“I would say, she is already beginning to fit in, like, like she’s done this before. I think we’ll find her records say this is not her first time in a facility such as ours”.

Darren Thompson nodded his head, thinking on what he had seen. Sharon Bell, checked her notes, gathered from duty nurses, nodded as well. “Yes, after the first day. After...” She did not need to say after what.

“She has been pretty good, considering. Still very withdrawn, but not to depression levels. But one of my nurses said something.” She reviewed a clip chart with patient records attached.

“Here it is... She said that when Ms Moran came in, there was something else, other than the drugs, she said it seemed like she was in shock as well.” She shook her head. “Not really clear, but she’s one of my best nurses, seen a lot of drunks and overdoses.”

“Ok, thank you, I’ll make sure that’s in my notes”. Darren Thompson handing out an olive branch. “Anything else?” Headshakes around the table. It was early days yet, no treatment, just observation at the moment, if they had her detailed notes, more could be decided.

“We really need...” A knock at the door, the duty nurse on Darwin Ward put his head around the door.

“Sorry to interrupt, but these just arrived.” He waved a brown envelope with a thick blue file folder inside. “Jacqueline K Moran, quite a file. Felt you should have it immediately.” He walked in, passed it to Darren Thompson.

“Thank you Michael, let’s see...” He began scan reading it immediately.

“Well, there’s clearly a good deal here and ...” His phone rang, he glanced at it, unknown number, scowling as if the phone were somehow to blame, he pushed the “reject” button.

“Ok, well, I’ll review these and bring you up to speed tomorrow...” Something caught his eye, under next-of-kin. “Jacqueline Katherine Moran...a.k.a Katie Moran”. He was reading, Katie Moran? He knew the name. He read on...

“Mother, Jennifer Moran, deceased, Father, John “Happy Jack” Moran ... deceased too ...ah!” A tone of wonder, and the sound of pennies dropping into place. How he had not connected the two things was beyond him. Really of course any two dots are connected by a straight line, but that line is just arbitrary until you see a reason to draw it. And, she had not looked like the many photographs that even he had seen of Katie Moran, hell raising daughter of pop

star, Happy Jack Moran. The near shaved head, the sense of defeat, all now made a clearer picture.

“Well, it seems we have a celebrity with us, or at least the daughter of one.” The faces around the table turned again to him. Famous faces were not that unusual here. The Kirchon hospital was a mental private health crisis intervention centre, typically with patients moving on to other clinics, or out into the world, after a time with them. There were small smiles and a gasp around the table. Happy Jack was way more than a celebrity, he was pop royalty, old pop royalty, from the eighties and nineties, but guaranteed even now to draw a crowd.

Katie had been part of that story from her birth. Then the follow up realization struck. Jacq...Katie Moran had been in the newspapers only recently, as a shadowy figure photographed hurrying from one doorway to another, but he rarely followed that type of story.

“But ... Oh my.” Sister Bell was not often stuck for words, but clearly was this time. “Happy Jack? But it was only ... a few days ago, a week maybe...”. She continued, dragging the memory forward.

“That he, the papers, it was in all the papers, he died... Wasn’t it an overdose?” Voices chatter and cross around the room, filling in details, then quieting as they notice Thompson becoming annoyed, he picks up the meeting again.

“Well, it seems Ms Moran is more than normally associated with drama at the moment.”

The room phone rang, was picked up quickly by Jane Donovan, "Yes?" With an undertone of "Why are you interrupting the Case Review meeting?"

"Oh, well, hold on...I'll check..." Then a second question seemed to be asked. "What? No, tell them no comment, patient confidentiality."

"It's the switchboard, they have Sir Stephen on the phone, on line one, asking if he can talk to you re Ms Moran." Looking at Darren Thompson.

Thompson recognised the meeting was not going to get any further forward. "Well, it seems like whilst Jacqueline Moran is a quiet and unassuming character, Katie Moran does indeed carry a Marley load of trouble around with her. Very well, let's adjourn this until the pm review. Tell them I'll take it in my office." The last to Jane Donovan. He rose, and they all followed him out.

CHAPTER 5

Edgar sits beneath the gaze of the room. Hands raised, screen on in front of him, it is clean, a snowfield daring him to walk into the wilderness. Borrowing from Dickens, he thinks how this moment is the best of times, and the worst of times. The first word will lead to the next until, in a way that he still finds mystical and terrifying, he will come to a point where he is no longer the master of the story, merely midwife.

The mystery of Catherine Bennet holds him. Not the strangeness of her presence, but her choice of him as, as what? Amanuensis? Biographer? Neither are quite correct. He is to write her future, her life from the moment she truly stepped from the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. Where to begin? How to begin? There is a weight here, a beginning, he thinks of Tolkien's

warning to Frodo, “You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

He begins.

Catherine Bennet – a biography

Within a second, he deletes the page. That is not the tone or style of the story, that is not how this young lady would describe her life. He has stepped out onto the road without the merest consideration of his ability to travel, whether he is fit to make this journey.

The biggest whys of it, the why of him, why did she choose him? Also, how was she able to choose him? These need to be answered. Because he knows she is not the only one. He has seen the others, some waiting in the mist, one, a boy forever running past. Another, an older darker figure seemingly arguing with himself. He doesn't know who they are, but knows as he knew Catherine, that they have sought him out, have been drawn to him as moths to light. He understands, as sure as fire burns a cornfield, that if he writes for Catherine Bennet, she will be the first, but not the last.

That is the mystery that will, haunt him, “haunt”, as good a word as any. He can write Catherine Bennet's story, but there is a second story he must write at the same time, his own. What is it of his life that has brought them together? He begins again. He will write their stories together. His and hers, and the others. In that writing he can understand what brought them to him, and him to this place. He must explore his past as he creates the futures of these strange ghosts.

He turns to the keyboard again, sighs, steels himself, then begins, the click of keys and the intermittent whirring of the computer fan become the only sounds in the room.

The Ghost Writer

My name is Edgar Johnson. My soul, my soul and my life had been poured into books, reading and writing, and now I write the lives of those who have been forgotten. This though is the story of my life, of the journey I made from the banal to the unusual.

I was born at a time of war. Blue skies had white lines of smoke drawn on them as deep throated engines pulsed the air and young men burned in the sky to fall to their deaths. My first memories were not, though, of the bombs and blitz. I do not even recall the shortages and rationing. Perhaps the whines of sirens woke me in my cot, but if they did, then I'm sure that as a child I no more thought them as strange as I did anything else, when all was new to me.

I remember my father, the tart smell of him, his pipe and cologne, the feel of him, large smooth hands, office hands I was to learn later, and a beard that bristled my child's skin to soreness. I remember my mother, fragrant and soft bodied, hands always held out to pick me up, words that soothed. Those days, so long-ago, hover in my memory, like grey mist at the bottom of a dell, which vanishes when stared at too long.

I had but a short time with them. They sent me away to school, this was the way of our people then. My father and mother were proud to be a place above the tradesmen, and my schooling was more evidence of that. It was the way of things I am sure, and to have held me home

would have been unthinkable, would not be thought of, could not be thought of. Perhaps they were sad at my leaving, I think not though.

My father had work in the Ministry of Aviation to do, and my mother, she had to care for him, it was her way, and she loved him, I am sure. I remember thinking how perhaps when I had left, though of course I did return on holidays, that one day there would be another little child there. It would be many years before I thought of how this might happen, and like all children, I assume, I could not imagine my parents doing such a thing. I think I was pleased when I returned to find that my room had not been turned over to some new child. Though now, now with those days long gone and my only companions the scribbled words of half a century, perhaps I miss the brother or sister I never had.

School, boarding school, preparatory school. A school to prepare me for university, and for life. It was a fine school, in the countryside, stone walls but for the most part not too stony-faced teachers. They were a strange mixture, many older ones because the youngest had not survived the war. I arrived when I was seven, just two years after the war had finished. A time when England was rebuilding and my Father's work was even more important, designing parts for planes that would keep the cold war frozen and not boil over into terror and atom bomb fires.

The other children, boys only of course, were all of their time. Many had lost a parent in the war, often a father, sometimes a mother bombed in the blitz. It was not unusual then, we got used to the sound of crying in the night, and sometimes the wife of the housemaster would comfort a boy. In the way of those things when we saw there was a weakness to be exploited,

we did. Or did not when the place of the boy in the hierarchy was too strong. I learned early how to hold any sadness back, the stiff upper lip of the Englishman trained on the playing fields of England.

The light through the window began to fade. Edgar turned on the table light. The memory of those days stirred through him, something turned inside him, like a fish twisting the surface of a lake. Tolkien had been right. He had stepped off on a journey, and already he thought he could hear wolves circling in the distance.

He reread what he had written, felt his soul shrink a little. The words were drained and flat, they were not him, they were like the stains left by leaves when they rot on a path. There had been a time, he knew, when his younger self would have sprung from the pages, pulling a kite and whooping with joy. He knew that. He might rail against the world for his failure, but it was his. How long now since then, since those days when his fingers flew, and the keys sang, and the words danced to his tune?

He turned the monitor off, the computer giving a last whir. Enough for now. He would continue when he was ready, after he next met with Catherine Bennet. That last thought was like a bright flaring torch in the dark. The fish dived to the depths, and the wolves drifted off in search of other prey.

Outside, in the distance, a single bright star caught his attention for a moment, before he turned away.

CHAPTER 6

“Jacqui! - Are you responsible for this!?” The words were sharp, but you had only to touch the surface to find the smile beneath. Michael Marshall, duty nurse, was holding up a piece of paper which had been left on his desk, whilst looking at “call me Jacqui”, Moran, who sat on a table in the Common Room, legs swinging. He read aloud,

“There once was a nurse named Bell.

“Who made a peculiar smell,

she said with a laugh, and that’s only half”, he paused, and Katie came in with the punch-line,

“Which very soon they all could tell!” A nurse across the room laughed, and two of the residents clapped in appreciation, she slipped off the table and gave a small bow.

“You know”, said Michael as she fell in step beside him, “She’s actually a sister.”

“I know, I know, but Sister Bell doesn’t scan, it has too many syllables. Never let the truth get in the way of great writing, that’s what I think!”. He smiled again and nodded. His was a difficult role, good looking and charming with what even his mother described as a “roguish smile”, female residents, vulnerable and uncertain, would often fall for him. But in Jacqui he had not seen any warning signs, and he relaxed. He liked her, not that he was alone in that.

“Ah, your just jealous it wasn’t about you”, she teased, then extemporized.

“Young Michael is a dashing man, and for the ward he has a plan.” She paused, thinking, then, slowly...“Keep the patient’s happy, don’t let them get ...sappy, and they’ll turn out as good as they can!” She laughed, and he joined in. She had a good eye he noted, she had summed up his approach well.

“You’re seeing Dr Thompson later? The big goodbye I think?” He asked, voice dropping a little, trying to convey sadness and happiness at the same time. She nodded, a brief smile, silently acknowledging what he had not said. She started to walk away; towards a group of four residents who were sat together, watching her.

“Book club?” He asked, knowing the answer, Michael knew everything that happened in the Common Room. “Yes, Nicholas Nickleby, the greatest of all Dicken’s work. Today he rants about plagiarism, a proto- Ayn Rand!” She laughed again as he makes a hand moving over his head motion. Walking off, he heard her, “Hello all, Sammy, Madam Clarissa,” (in a tone that spoke of a shared joke), “Billy, how are you today?” genuine concern in her voice, “so where did we get to yesterday?”

Later, as Darren Thompson sat with her, he considered the changes that three months had brought. She was still dressed in jeans, but different ones, and a new top. Her hair had grown, enough even for a professional cut. She now had a sharp, almost elven look. He noted that she had kept her hair short, not allowed it to even start to reach the ‘auburn mane’ the Press would often mention.

“We were just talking about fathers,” she said, in that leap-into-a-conversation way he had grown used to. He looked at her quizzically, and she nodded outside to the Common Room. The two of them were again in one of the set off ‘discussion’ rooms. As if on some unseen cue there was a burst of laughter from outside, then a more discordant cry.

“Yes, because we’ve been reading Nicholas Nickleby, and of course his father dies, and Ralph Nickleby never even acknowledges poor Smike.” She talks as though everyone knows all the Dicken’s stories. Thompson has found that about, Jacqui, he reminded himself. She was much deeper than he might have expected of a pop-star’s daughter. Acknowledging at the same time, just how unprofessional the thought was.

“And?” He knows she has a point. “And I was thinking about my Father, how, how really, you know, Well, it was a strange relationship.” He nods, they have been here before.

“Don’t get me wrong” she hurries on. “Look at this.” She suddenly leaps up, taking a phone out. “Don’t worry, no sim-card, no internet, no foul!” Seeing his surprised look. He smiles. She has an ability to head troubles off at the pass, and he has heard how well she has got on with the other residents. This is good and bad, good to see the natural her, but he doesn’t want her to become too dependent on this place.

She shows him her phone, primed to a video which starts on a click of her finger. She is relaxed beside him. She seems to be able to do that, create a bubble of, not calm, but comfort. He has a sense of sinking into a large sofa on a Sunday afternoon and sipping a beer, and pulls himself back. How does she do that? “Watch”, she says, excited, but wanting to make a point, she’s always telling stories.

“See, they’re in some posh pad in Chelsea. The video’s jumping around, zooming in and out, shame, but – here’s the first bit.” She stopped; he could hear a shushing sound of voices. The picture was indistinct, but he guessed that this must be Happy Jack, he tuned in with his ears.

“Shut the fuck up!” shouts someone on the screen. After more shushing and calling it goes quiet, and then a voice he almost knows can be heard. Despite himself he says,

“Is that?” Katie nods, and grins, and looks more alive than she has since he first met her.

“Yeah Dave-Lee-Travis, voice of Radio, ‘til he told the BBC they could go take one!”

There is some more confusion in the recording, then Thompson hears, “And the new number one is ‘Happy Jack Moran and Baby Get it On’”. And that guitar riff that launched a million dance-floor moves bursts out of the radio, and the video. She laughs beside him, but he knows that this is not just a memory. Katie, Jacqui, is always analysing, trying to see the depth below the surface.

“Quite a memory.” But she cuts him off.

“No, the best bit is next, see, see her!” She points to the screen at someone that even with the poor video Thompson can tell is a beautiful woman. “It’s my mum”.

She pauses, smiles, “Get ready...”. The sounds are indistinct, Katie fills in the gaps, “She’s telling him about, about me, she was just pregnant!” Katie smiles again, he can feel what it means to her. Her emotions don’t flood from her, they expand, and bring people into them.

The camera panned back to Happy Jack, who could be seen getting up. The music stopped; he had switched it off. He looks at his wife, the camera zooming in jerkily, so you could almost see her reflected in his eyes. “Now that’s something worth celebrating!” The camera stopped, zoomed in on the young Jack Moran, Marc Bolan looks and Mick Jagger voice, born to run.

“Got this from You Tube” she says. That’s the dad I want to remember. Happy Jack he was then, and happy Jack always, but I never saw him happier than when he knew I was going to be born. That was my first memory of my dad”. The room went quiet, she left the words hanging in the air. Thompson scribbled another note. His pen scratchy on the surface, discordant to the mood.

“And, you know” she continues, strong but wistful, “It was always like that, there was never a day that he didn’t tell me he loved me, even, even when I was in and out of rehab. He never gave up on me. Never.” Again, a silence, and he could sense she was thinking about her father’s death.

She had told him about it. Told him in that way of hers that he had become familiar with. She could weave words and stories from the air, put pieces together so that the sense of it, and how it felt, and its essence, was clear. And, even when it wasn’t beautiful, it was always poignant.

She’d found him, face down in the pool. It was clear now, from the autopsy, that he’d taken way too much that evening, perhaps even enough to kill him. The plunge into the water was merely fate’s dramatic flourish. But there was no thought that the death was anything but accidental.

Thompson now knew the rest, from the papers and the police. How Happy Jack’s manager had called them in. Then Jacqui had been pursued around London and the Home Counties by every newspaper man in England, cameras flashing, and words shouted. How, when her

father lay dead, she was not even allowed to stop and think of him, to grieve. At last, desperate and nearly too late, she'd called Sir Stephen, and he'd got her here, as a starting place for the new life she had promised her father she would begin.

Of course, that hadn't been the only tragedy. The other still lay, unclear. Dark shadows moving on a stairwell, but no one, not even the HSE, could untangle the truth, nor see that Jacqui had any further questions to answer.

He looked up; he had been lost in his thoughts for a moment. "And now, now I think you are ready to move on from here, to The Grange in Haddenham?" It was said as a question, as if she had made those arrangements without his involvement. She nodded, and he saw, he thought, a different person, a more determined one. This time, perhaps, she would come out the other side to a path she could follow forward, and not just an endless long circle back to another dead end.

CHAPTER 7

Jackson, who Myra had named after the painter in recognition of the dog's large under carriage, barked. She nodded and lifted the yellow ball thrower to send its payload sailing out across the park. There had been a time she wouldn't have used the thrower, but now, balanced on the knife edge between forty and fifty, she appreciated the help it gave.

In honesty, the dog too, was a little past its prime. Whilst he set off with appropriate enthusiasm, he soon slowed, sidling up to the ball at the end of the run. Still, he regained energy for the return, his Bulldog jowls flapping and tongue lolling in a way that did justice to every dog stereotype. She bent to pat him on his return and glanced up as she rose.

The Man in the Hat was sitting on his bench again. She couldn't remember when she'd first noticed him. She brought Jackson here most mornings and had long realised that memory worked forwards and as well as backwards. In seeing a person, say, a third time, then you remembered the previous times. Now the man had become a regular feature of her morning.

It had been the hat that had first caught her attention. Jackson had a thing about men in hats, and in his younger days had caused a number of embarrassing incidents. But the dog had ambled past with barely a glimpse the first time they'd seen him, and now seemed to ignore the seat entirely. She had breathed a sigh of relief; non-dog owners just did not have the same sense of tolerance as dog owners when it came to being barked at or chased for a piece of apparel.

The hat was part of his seemingly invariable wardrobe. He was dressed each day in a grey coat, scarf around his neck and heavy trousers, appropriate for the sharp November morning. He was, she thought, closer to sixty-five than seventy, but sat upright, gazing a little into the distance. A man with memories and perhaps an air of melancholy about him. or carrying a secret burden.

She didn't make a habit of assessing all the people she saw, but the man had something about him. Or actually, she thought on reflection, it was the way he didn't seem to be completely part of the scene. He was sitting on the seat, that was true, but sometimes it seemed to her that it wasn't actually supporting him. But she was prone to flights of fancy like that, an occupational hazard, or a pre-occupational hazard, she thought, and chuckled to herself at the pun.

Jackson barked again, bringing her back from her musings. "Ok, last throw, I have to go meet with a reporter today, I am to be famous, or a little so." The dog took no notice, he did not care for fame,

not when there was a ball to be chased. “The Times Literary Supplement,” she thought again to herself with a glow of pride tinged with, what was it called? Yes, ‘Imposter Syndrome’.

Myra owned a publishing company, Pattison Publishing, one she had built from first operating from her kitchen table to now plush offices in Hampstead. Given that it was generally recognised that the way to make a small fortune in publishing, was to start with a large one, her success was a real feat.

That was what the article was to be about. “Women in publishing’ was a series of articles the TLS was running to celebrate the achievements of women in what had been a male dominated industry. Whilst the intent was to encourage women into the industry, to show that they could succeed, she couldn’t help but feel that the very focus on gender was counterproductive.

“Well, yes, of course, in the early days, I did all the jobs” (light laugh, throw head back) “Now I mostly delegate!” She practised answering the questions she assumed would come. In truth the journey from doing every job in the business herself to a staff of 45, had been one of fifteen years and a great deal of hard work, heartache and hangovers. Many of those memories coming back now.

“Yes, I set the company up on my thirtieth birthday, funded by a small redundancy package and a large credit card limit”. It was a truth, of sorts. But, well, THAT. THAT was not part of the story, though thoughts of the interview had brought the memories back. Shaking her head, as if doing so would clear the detritus of the past, she collected Jackson and began the walk to her apartment.

The Man in The Hat had moved on, she noticed.

Again, she ran over the details she would discuss with the reporter, pushing aside those she did not want to recall. The redundancy had been a catalyst. She had been working for Sawter and Smith, a

leading publishing company, since she had left university. Her Red Brick College First in Business Strategy and Management and an M.A. in English literature making her a perfect fit for the company's graduate recruitment scheme. Of course, it never hurt to have a woman for HR to roll out to photo-ops. But she had set that thought aside and had been delighted when she was assigned to work with an editor with an already glowing reputation.

The publishing world had indeed been a natural fit for her interests and talents. She had loved every part of it, particularly the challenge of taking creative work and finding the commercial opportunity. "But you know" (a smile this time, leaning forward perhaps?) "It turned out I was not a good employee, oh, I am sure I was diligent, but maybe I asked too many questions, pushed harder than the others for the next opportunity." It was a trope, but also true. "In absolute honesty" (yes, it was the truth, but not the whole truth). "I found I did not enjoy being a small cog in a big corporate machine, and I had decided I would leave. But you know, change is hard, and sometimes you need a push."

Myra is into the flow now, building a vision of how her tale would be told. Knowing, but ignoring, that she was picking highlights and areas of focus with all the judicious focus of a photoshop professional.

"So, when the opportunity came. I grabbed that redundancy package and hardly looked back!"

And that also was true. But it hid the anger and hurt she'd felt. The surprised comments of her colleagues, the way HR had glossed over exactly how she had been chosen amongst the many there. True, one or two others had left then, but...well, enough, it had turned out for the best, hadn't it? The first three years had been a struggle to sort the writing wheat from the chaff. Although, actually, finding authors was never difficult.

Every other retired Bank Manager and bored housewife seemed to have written at least half a novel. The challenge wasn't even finding good writers, who might only make up ten percent of those she met, but she met a lot. The challenge was finding work which would sell. It wasn't the case that a good book would necessarily sell, or a badly written one wouldn't, what you needed was the ability to see what the market wanted, before the market knew. That was something Myra was good at.

Her big break had come with her discovery of 'Madam Sylvia'. Sylvia Chapelstone was a medium who rivalled Jackson in the ability to meet stereotype expectations. In public she wore long dark coats and affected a distracted air as though constantly at the beck and call of, 'Those on the other side'. Myra had seen the success of the Most Haunted TV programs and had backed her hunch that that popularity would support Sylvia. Her book, "The spirit world, and how to communicate with it", had been a success beyond all their expectations. That success was partly built on Myra's ability to generate publicity opportunities, and Sylvia's to take advantage of them.

On the back of the first book and a series of brilliant mid-morning TV chat show appearances, Sylvia had gained her own TV show, with a 'trashy Lifestyle channel' as she called it. But, two further books had followed, making good profits for Myra and shifting the business into a higher plane, which had only seemed appropriate. She had moved the offices to Hampstead, and herself to her apartment in Golders Hill, where she still lived.

Since making her mark in the "popular non-fiction" market she had established a popular science arm, and a department publishing books focussed on e-marketing and internet selling. This route often cut out some the "dealing with agents" stage, which she felt had strengths and weaknesses. It meant that they had to work harder to sort out the good and the bad ideas. Agents were excellent at that. Jackson dragged on his lead, and she looked down at him. Perhaps he sensed the memories the upcoming interview had stirred. She laughed to herself, looked down at him.

“Come on you, you’re going to make the December issue of Time.” Riffing on a Joan Baez song.

Chapter 8

He was back at his front door, key out, into the lock and in the hallway before the thought of the manuscripts touched his mind.

It had been a day, or a time at least, he could hardly remember the start or the finish of it. It had been a time, that if he could hold it in his hands would be a glowing crystal ball, multi-faceted lights shining to every corner of the room. He had walked with Kitty Bennet. Formal at first, then more relaxed as the focus on their task had brought them together.

They had stopped every now and then to watch the life in the park. Young men cycling past, people chatting, the woman he had seen before, throwing her ball for her dog. She used some strange plastic contraption to flick the ball into the air, and Kitty had laughed at it.

As they walked and talked, he felt her grow more real in his mind. He knew Kitty Bennet was just a figment of a writer’s imagination, conjured in a way neither of them understood. But, of course, such characters are a collaboration between writer and reader. Once Austen had released her to the world, the world was free to remake her in whatever image. He suspected that it was this very state, ambiguous as it was, that allowed him to feel so at ease. She might lay her hand on his arm, yet he hardly felt the weight, it was more that he heard the words being written to describe the act.

They had planned and schemed, “We are plotting are we not Mr Edgar?.” She had said and laughed at the pun. Then, he suggested the title, unsure at first,

"I thought, perhaps we should call it *'From Pembury to the Pacific Islands - The Extraordinary adventures of Kitty Bennet.'* She had laughed, delighted, and clapped her hands.

Now, with those thoughts in his mind, he began to type, then backspaced the words away. He watched the letters chisel their way onto the screen, and, and nothing. There was no flow here, the words were not real to him. He stood up, the ideas were in his mind, his day with Kitty fully formed and as real as his desk and computer, but, the words would not flow. He could hear the rustling of the papers on the shelf.

He kicked the desk, the computer rocked, sound echoed, the fan burst into life, and the drawer of the desk bounced open.

He saw, amongst the paperclips and rubber bands, staples and detritus of days gone by, an old black biro pen, curved and comfortable. He looked at it, picked it up. It felt, felt, right. A thought came to him and he opened the second drawer of the desk. A pad of lined paper, it seemed, not to glow, but to invite.

The room quieted. He thought for a moment that the manuscripts held their breath. He sat down again. The empty room, the paper, the pen. The last rays of sunlight shining in through the window, angled just so a square of gold caught the pages. He thought of Jane Austen, thought of her writing, short simple sentences which seemed to carry you like a shallow stream down a hillside, but if you looked, there was depth in every word.

He imagined Jane Austen standing behind him, imagined hearing her words as she wrote. And he wrote. And what writing, not his words he knew, a lightness, a flow that he never achieved.

Did he write? Tell her how to write? Or was she helping him? It little mattered, He watched the pen move, and saw how Kitty Bennet's new life was drawn across the pages. Drawn in words of humour and subtlety, a gentle warmth which still hinted at cold depths if you chose to feel them.

He remembered how he had learned to ride a bike. Handlebars wobbling from side to side, the effort of the pedals, his father urging him on whilst holding the back of the bike. Then he had found himself flying along with no support.

It was like that now, the writing. The words flew and filled the pages, and as he wrote there was a hint of sadness in the back of his mind. The more he wrote of her, the more the words would carry her not just from Pembury, but also from the park, and from him, from their plotting and planning. He felt at that moment that eternity would not be long enough for the writing he wished to do.

At the thought, the bulb on his desk lamp blew.

"Well," He thought chuckling, "The universe reminds me that I do not have quite that much time".