DE PROFUNDIS

INTRODUCTION

‘De Profundis’ by Al Robertson was first published in Black Static 11. It was long-listed for the 2010 British Fantasy Award in the Best Novella category, and received an honourable mention in Ellen Datlow’s Best Horror of the Year 2009.

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DE PROFUNDIS

As Saul held his adoptive mother’s fragile hand, he remembered the corpse he had retrieved from the Thames earlier that day. The rising tide had lodged it beneath a dinner cruise pontoon, on the Bermondsey side of the river. It had been spotted at low tide; by the time the dive team had arrived, the water had rushed in around it, and the body was fully submerged.

Saul had swum down on his own, found the bloated, water-changed face and pearl white eyes looking past him, down the river and out towards the Channel. The hushing currents had tugged at his dry suit like a live thing as he’d let the divemaster know of his find, and then started to free the dead man. On the surface, the standby diver would be entering the water with the stretcher, the others preparing themselves for a new, silent companion.

And then his adoptive mother’s voice cut into his mind, pulling him back from the day’s work to her close little care home room.

‘When’s Raymond coming in?’ she said.

‘He’s out getting something to smoke.’

‘Oh. A twenty pack of Senior Service, that’s what he likes.’

Saul had decided that it was cruel to explain, again and again, that his adoptive father was dead. Pamela lived in a world of fractured moments, cut down to fill the smallest possible space. Soon, he thought, even those small bright places would ebb and be gone, snuffed out by time and silence. Every life becomes a tide that only flows one way.

‘And the boy?’ Pamela asked, turning to him.

‘He’s out playing.’

‘I do hope he’s found a friend. He’s never really settled, that one. Never made us family.’

He looked past her, out of the window. He should be used to it, by now. Her bone-light empty hand in his – and, beyond the glass, the grey and silent clouds. He remembered the river’s language - a hushing on mud banks, a slapping on boat side; implicit in it all, the deep perpetual roar of the distant seas.

That night he dreamt of storms, the ocean thrusting hard against a shore dotted with broken buildings, until both were indistinguishable, all difference lost in a roaring haze of brine and sand.

He fought and fought to escape into air, but could not resist being sucked under. As he went down for the last time he realised with something like relief that he was leaving the hurricane roar of the ruined world behind for something soft, and silent, and at peace. A deeper sleep took him to its annihilating heart, and no more dreams came.

Next morning the same as every morning. Touching Timmy’s face in the photo by the bed. The bubbling of the filtration device as he fed his pets; all the Angel Fish, twin Dwarf Catfish, a Rainbow Fish and a Cockatoo Chiclid, a little fiesta of brilliant colours snapping at the surface of the water. Instant coffee, and the milk had gone off, so he had it black. Caffeine shivered through him as he reached Wapping Police Station. He ran his warrant card through the security reader at the entrance, and went in.

A PC stopped at Saul’s cubicle as he booted up his computer.

‘Morning Saul. Got some news on that floater you brought in.’

‘The body from the pontoon?’ said Saul.

‘We’ve ID’d it. David Bushell, lived and died in Teddington.’

‘You’re sure that’s where he went in?’

‘That’s what his wife says. Reported him missing a couple of days back.’

Saul was surprised. It was a good twenty miles

between Teddington and Wapping. The tides hardly ever carried a corpse so far, so quickly. There was so much beneath the surface to catch at a body, to hold it down.

‘When’s the autopsy?’ asked Saul. As a Police Diver, his responsibility extended beyond recovery. To ensure continuity of evidence, he had to attend the autopsy and identify the body as the one he had pulled from the river.

‘A day or two. I’ll have a time tomorrow.’

As they were talking, emails flooded Saul’s in-tray. One was from his boss. ‘See me, ASAP’.

Inspector Larrik was just as terse in person.

‘Bushell’s wife’s asked to see you, Saul.’

Through the Inspector’s window, the Thames rolled by, tugging at Saul’s thoughts. It was high tide, so the river was at its broadest. Wind-roughened waves danced endlessly across it, hieroglyphs in an unknowable language. Saul remembered his fish at home; imagined vivid, luminous creatures, barely hidden beneath the muddy Thames water.

‘Saul?’

His attention snapped back into the room.

‘Why does she want to see me?’

‘You brought him out, Saul.’

It was a quiet day, and so Saul had no reason to refuse when Bushell’s wife suggested that he visit her that afternoon. As the train rattled towards the suburbs, he thought about responsibility. He had been the first to touch the dead man; had brought him gently to shore, so that he could be prepared for his final moments of human presence. Soon, he would join the pathologist as he dissected him, helping read the end from the remnants. Perhaps it was that relationship that Bushell’s wife wished to honour, a final set of intimacies that she could not share. He readied himself for awkward conversation, a slowly cooling cup of tea.

She gasped when she opened the door, and looked away.

‘Sergeant McManus’ he said.

‘Oh. Of course. Come in.’

‘Judy’, she’d said, then left him in the living room. Patio doors, and then the garden, and then the Thames. The grass was a deep, rich green, mulched in river mud and all the more alive for it. Bright flowers danced around the lawn. There was no fence at the end of the garden, nothing to stand between the land and the water. Saul imagined Bushell standing there, looking out – and then taking one step, and then another, and moving beyond this life. He remembered Sarah leaving him, as their own marriage collapsed.

‘It didn’t happen here’, said Judy.

He hadn’t heard her come into the room. She was turned away from him, setting down a small tray. China clinked against itself. He looked round the room, noticing many photo frames. Most had been reversed and turned against the wall.

‘He – left – from up by the lock’, she said.

Saul took his cup of tea. Judy settled herself into a seat. When she spoke, her voice was awkwardly loud.

‘When you found him – did he look different?’

‘Well, the water changes people – after they spend time in it. But you shouldn’t think about that.’

‘So he looked – normal? Like anyone else would – if they go like that?’

The question puzzled him, but he understood what she needed to hear.

‘Yes’, he said.

‘Thank you.’

She was still looking at the floor. Grief had scrubbed the prettiness from her. She broke the silence with a question.

‘He’s still at Wapping?’

‘In the station mortuary. We’ll release him after the autopsy.’

‘That’s good.’

More silence, and then she spoke again. Now, her words came out in a rush, like water tumbling over a weir.

‘I called because I wanted to warn you – to ask you – to look after him. To keep an eye on him. But now I’ve met you there’s something else.’

She reached for one of the turned away photo frames, and passed it to him. As she did so, for the first time she met his eyes, and then flinched and glanced away again.

‘Look’, she said.

He turned the frame over in his hands, and there was a photograph, and he nearly dropped it. For there he was in the picture; arms around Judy, beaming with joy, staring out at himself from a hot summer’s day he’d never been a part of.

‘For a moment I thought he’d come back’ she said. ‘Of course, that’s foolish.’

She looked at him again, and this time she held his gaze. As if seeing her for the first time, Saul realised that she’d been broken as much by shock as by grief. And now there seemed to be a terrible disquiet about her, a mongrel blend of fear and anticipation.

‘You were adopted too, weren’t you, Sergeant? Your mother was from Northampton. And you’re one of three. Triplets.’

He had known nothing about his mother, or about any brothers. He’d been told that the orphanage had been flooded, the adoption records lost.

The conversation became awkward for both of them, and so the meeting ended. ‘I’m glad it was you that found Dave’, she said, smiling awkwardly, then ‘I’m not sure about the funeral’. They exchanged mobile numbers. She touched at Saul’s arm as he stood at the door, then pulled her hand away again. He didn’t go back to work.

That night, the phone rang. Saul had already had half a bottle of Glenfiddich, so he let it go through to voicemail. It would probably be a tele-marketeer trying to sell him something, or a machine voice telling him he had won a free holiday, that he could escape to somewhere hot beside the sea.

It was Sarah. He listened as she left her message. ‘Tim still hasn’t settled in at big school, Alain just can’t get through to him. He needs to talk to his – to you. Call when you get this.’

He finished the bottle. In the water, he had an AGA mask, a dry suit, three different sources of air, and on the surface a divemaster, standby diver and support team to keep him safe. Here there was nothing and no-one, and so as he reeled and staggered to bed the flat span around him unchecked, treacherous as a flood tide in full spate. Then sleep broke over him like a wave, and pulled him down into dreams of his own face, fathoms deep, shifting through pearl whiteness and beyond into jade and gold. As he watched, it transcended into something so deeply, exquisitely of the seas that it could only seem entirely alien to all that had been left behind.

Next morning, a whisky hangover beat sharp spikes into his head. Paperwork at his desk until he began to feel human again, and then he went to confirm the time of Bushell’s autopsy.

‘He’s been released’, said the PC.

‘What? Without an autopsy?’

‘The Night Pathologist carried it out last night.’

‘Dr Horsell? He couldn’t have done it without me.’

‘It wasn’t Horsell. The Home Office sent down a locum. Dr Alcott.’

‘I don’t care if the Queen sent him. I brought Bushell in. I have to identify him.’

‘You were out. Alcott asked your standby diver to confirm the body’s identity. It’s entirely legitimate.’

‘But I wanted to see him again.’

‘Look, Alcott’s done you a favour.’

‘I should have been there.’

‘You’re an old hand, Saul. Why so hung up on this one?’

The body had at least been photographed, with printouts left in the case file. Saul pulled out a head and shoulders shot. Maceration had begun; the skin was wrinkled and, without embalming, would soon begin to shed. Some patches had already flaked off. The flesh left behind had an iridescent, greenish bronze sheen to it, and was lightly ridged, falling into feathered patterns reminiscent of tiny scales. The neck was heavily wrinkled, with sharply defined lateral ridges forming where deep muscle structures had begun to reveal themselves. All hair had dropped away. The eyes were dead fish white.

Try as he might, Saul could see no family resemblance in this transfigured face. He put the picture away, and thought for a moment about his third brother. He wondered which of them had been born first; whether he was an older, a middle or a younger child. Whether his other brother was even still alive.

There were more photographs in the envelope. Saul pulled out another one, his fingers touching at pale, dead hands. The print was cold and slightly clammy. He held the image for a long time, and then put it away with the rest.

The Night Pathologist had – as bureaucracy demanded – signed the cover of the folder, leaving his email under his name. Saul was

surprised to see that it was a Foreign Office address. Perhaps the doctor had recently completed an exchange posting there, and had now returned to the police force, electronic abstraction not yet catching up with reality. Saul wrote a note of complaint, and hit send. Almost instantly the email bounced back.

‘Address not known’.

‘Bastard’, said Saul.

That night, he called Sarah.

'I've found my mother,' he told her.

'Oh dear. What happened? Did she escape from the hospital? Is she alright?'

'No. My real mother. There are two brothers, too.'

‘Didn’t Pamela say the records had been destroyed?'

'I didn't need them.'

Judy's information had made it surprisingly easy. After failing to track down Alcott, he had called Guildford Hospital, given them his birthday, and asked about any sets of triplets that had been born on or around that date. There was only one. The hospital had at first refused to release the details, but when he had told them that he was a police sergeant, given them his warrant number, and begun complaining about all the bureaucracy surrounding court ordered information requests, they had opened up to him.

'Are you going to get in touch with her?'

'I’m not sure.'

'Oh, Saul, you're such a cold fish.'

Saul said nothing. With the information that Guildford Hospital had given to him, he had tracked his mother – Annabel Fairchild – down to Cain Hill, a private sanatorium just outside Guildford. Doors had opened for him there, too, when he had identified himself as a police officer. An initially friendly doctor had been able to tell him about the breakdown that had led to his mother’s ongoing confinement.

As a teenager, she had been sucked into ‘The Evolution’, one of the cults that had been so common back in the 60s, and taken to Mexico. Her parents had hired lawyers, investigators, to plead kidnap, bring her home. But by then the psychedelic hurricane that surrounded her had done its work, and she had gone too far out to ever really come back.

Her triplets – conceived on a nameless Yucatan beach – had been put up for adoption immediately after their birth, and Annabel had spent the last forty years in quiet, therapeutic confinement at Cain Hill. Saul had wanted to ask more questions, but he could sense a growing suspicion from his informant, and had had to ring off.

‘At least think about it’ said Sarah. ‘It might be good for Timmy, too, to meet her. Help him feel more rooted. And your brothers?’

‘I don’t know.’

He hadn’t wanted to explain about Bushell. Remembered arguments flooded over him. Saul and Sarah had managed to keep going for three years before the divorce. Sarah had been constantly tugging at him, pulling him out to meet her friends, insisting that he open up to her about whatever he was feeling. He had tried to explain that – for most of the time – he was quite happy on his own, that he felt little or no empathy with so many of the people that surrounded him, but she hadn’t believed him.

Things had already begun to fall apart when Timmy had been conceived. The pregnancy had led to a kind of truce; and then, when his son had been born, Saul had been overwhelmed by a deep and irresistible sense of kinship, an emotion that he’d never thought he’d feel. At last – he thought – he had understood family, and realised that home would be wherever he was together, safe, with his wife and child. And then the arguments had started up again, and he had found himself retreating deep into himself to hide from them, and in the end that precious new security had deserted him.

‘Can I speak to Timmy?’

‘He’s asleep.’

There were bustling noises in the background, words in French. Saul caught ‘chérie’, ‘qui ça?’, heard Sarah say his name, and a response that could have included ‘son petit étranger’.

‘Look, Saul, Alain’s home. Timmy will call you.’

‘Is he ok?’

‘He’s going to be glad to speak to you.’

The phone came down and then there was only silence, and an empty bottle of whisky. Hours to fill before he would be tired enough to sleep. Perhaps the silence would stretch out to fill the whole of the night, and he would pass it staring

up at the empty ceiling, imagining the empty sky beyond.

Another day at work; a day of routine, of filling in timesheets, catching up with filing, and solitude. Saul had hoped for a call out on a job, but none came in. For once, the waters of London were at peace. Feeling guilty about his conversations with Guildford Hospital and Cain Hill the previous day, he waited until his lunch break to search the internet for references to the cult that had been his mother's only real experience of adult life. He was surprised to find that several sites mentioned it, with a brief summary of the facts on Wikipedia.

The Evolution had been founded in the early 60s as little more than a weekly encounter group, but had rapidly evolved into something very different. By 1967 it had grown to include more than fifty members, mostly rather upper crust, who lived communally in a mansion in Chelsea. Their life together seemed to have been a kind of lived theatre; they only ever appeared in public in impressive black robes, and produced a regular, rather glamorous magazine that celebrated their philosophy and lifestyle. Jane Asher had been interviewed in one issue, Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull in another.

Halfway through the year, there had been some sort of upheaval. A splinter group of Evolutionaries, led by one of the cult's founders, had left both the mansion and the country for the Azores. There, they had chartered a boat and spent some time at sea, apparently taking part in various group rituals while on board. Then, they had moved on to the Yucatan Peninsula, camping out in Mayan ruins near the small fishing village of Xtul.

At first, life on the beaches of Xtul had been idyllic; the 60s dream of dropping out and finding paradise made blissfully real. But with the autumn came a series of increasingly ferocious storms, until at last the full force of a hurricane had struck the little camp, stripping away all the temporary structures that its inhabitants had built and battering ferociously at them for three days and nights.

It was in the storm's aftermath that the various lawyers and private investigators hired by concerned families had reached the encampment. They had discovered a dazed but ecstatic group, who understood the hurricane to have been at once both metaphysical test and transcendent fulfilment. Talk of direct contact with alien, trans-dimensional intelligences, of seeing past Euclidean space, of being able to remember the future, led to immediate action; in co-operation with local police, the younger members of the cult had been taken into protective custody, the older ones deported.

Saul's mother had been one of those tranced-out young. They had all been brought back to the UK. Some managed to reintegrate into their families, their old lives; some had broken away again, seeking other hippy utopias; some, like Annabel, had never managed to find their way back at all.

The older remnants of the group had last been sighted in Hollywood, hanging out with Dennis Wilson and attempting to convince him to fund a return trip to the Yucatan. When he apparently refused they had disappeared, and had not been heard from again. There were persistent rumours that Wilson – the only Beach Boy with any real knowledge of the seas – had in fact acceded to their request, travelling secretly with them to Mexico, but any hope of getting to the truth died with his drowning in 1983.

Saul sat back in his seat. He was astonished at his mother's life, at the brief, brilliant flash of psychedelic colour that had both burned her out and produced him, his brothers. His own life seemed so staid by comparison, so very conservative. Growing up in Slough with Raymond and Pamela; joining the police fresh out of college; training as a diver when it became clear just how drawn he was to the water.

He wondered what life would have been like had things worked out only slightly differently. There could have been a young, open, loving mother, two brothers to play with, a whole other family extending around and away from him. A strange kind of vertigo swept over him, a sense of shock at the gulf between his imagined and his actual lives. He closed down all the websites he'd found, and then left his desk for the station's equipment room, looking for comfort in breaking down and running a full check on his diving gear.

When he returned to his desk, the small red voicemail light on his phone was winking. Alcott had a clipped, precise voice. A rhythmic wheezing ran beneath it as he spoke. Saul wondered about interference on the line. The message was brief: 'Apologies for the other night, I didn't realise your connection to the patient. Call me.'

Alcott had left a number. Saul dialled it in - Alcott's voice again, 'I can't answer just now…'. Saul left his mobile number, and rang off. Outside, night had blackened the ebbing Thames, its muddy banks. Time to go home.

Little motes of stained glass brilliance danced in his fish tank, a vivid bustle of life and relationship. He watched them for a while, jealous. He had dialled Sarah's number, hoping to speak to

Timmy, but had only got her answerphone. He left no message. The night wore on; nothing on television. Drowning his sorrows didn't appeal. He found himself hitting dial on a number he had promised himself that he would not use. It rang for a long time before it was answered.

'Hello, Judy? It's Saul.'

No reply. Her breathing was a static drizzle in his ear, with a distant white noise roar soft behind it. Near silence ran on, until he had to fill it.

'I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything', he said, and took a deep breath, before continuing. 'I'm calling about the funeral. I know we talked about it – I never knew him, but…'

She said nothing, forcing him to fill the silence.

'…perhaps I should pay my respects.'

'Oh Saul', she said, almost pityingly, and then, after a pause 'I'm just by Teddington Lock. Can you hear the water, going over the weir?'

Saul understood that that was the distant roaring sound. 'Yes', he said. It was getting louder. She must be walking toward it, along the towpath. It was late; it would be lonely, there.

'I know it well', he said. 'You know why it's called Teddington?'

'Yes, it means Tide End Town. David told me that, too.'

'He told you what that means?'

'This is where the tides stop. The water sweeps up the Thames through London, until the push ends here. It's the last place the sea can reach, David always used to say. And then beyond that, everything's safe.'

'Safe?'

'He started to come down here most nights, towards the end. I followed him, once. He stood on the bridge for hours, just watching the river.'

'What was he looking for?'

'I don't know. Half the time he was looking upstream, and half the time down. I asked him about it the next day. He said he was trying to decide which side was home. I thought he was just being silly.'

The falling water roar had become so loud that Saul could hardly hear her.

'He found out in the end, though, didn't he?' she said.

'Judy, don't.'

'I've been thinking, Saul. He left so little behind. I've got the photos in the house… his clothes… otherwise, it's like I've been living on my own for the last three years. Like he'd never been there, was never part of all this. And then I look at the river, and that's the only place I can see him, now. Falling through the water. Where you found him.'

'A long way from where you are.'

'Yes, a long way upstream. You said that was unusual, didn't you? That he should get that far. But he knew where home was, by then. The river told him. Do you know, there was a time when I really thought we'd have a family together?'

Now the roar was so loud that it had become part of her words, part of the experience of listening to her. It was as if the river itself was whispering to him of pain, of loss. He had reached into it so many times, bringing the dead back to land. They would be mourned by those left behind, and then put into the earth, so that the mud could insulate them from the rhythms of the tides, and the perpetual dreaming gulfs of the lovely, distant sea.

'Judy? Are you still there?'

No breath, as he waited, to see if she'd reply.

'Oh yes.'

Relief shook him; relief, and an obscure and fleeting sense of loss.

'Are you alright?'

'I think so.'

She paused for a moment, and then said:

'You know, I think he'd be waiting there for me now, if I went in. At the end he talked so much about how the water would change things, about remembering a better life beneath it. But I won't, Saul, I won't.'

She said nothing for a few moments.

'I'm so glad you called, Saul.'

The roar of the weir was quietening, now, as she moved away from it.

'I think you're the only person who could really

understand.'

'Should I come to the funeral?'

'There won't be a funeral. He's done what he said he would. He's found where his home is, and he's gone.'

It took Saul a long time to get to sleep, that night. Judy had had to repeat what she'd said two or three times: that she was all that David could call family, and that she had not taken custody of his body. 'I'll look into it tomorrow', he'd said, but she had told him not to. 'This is how it needs to be, Saul.'

He had kept on talking to her until she'd returned home, and then put the phone down. He wasn't sure what to do for the best. Judy had almost convinced him that things were as they should be. He wondered about passing her details to the Grief Counselling Unit at Victim Support, before deciding to discuss the matter with Larrik first.

As he tried to sleep, he couldn't help imagining what it would be like to find her, at rest beneath the Thames. It would be so different from talking in her cramped little Teddington front room. The cold resolution of water would wash over them both. Imagination slipped imperceptibly into dream, and he saw himself unhooking her soft, pale body from the pier it had caught on, and letting it drift away on the current. There was someone there waiting for her, he could see now; hovering at the edge of the murk, at the edge of his vision. Two people.

And then all of a sudden it was he that was drifting with the current, unmoored from the concerns of life, floating easefully and being pulled along and down. There was a figure on either side of him; and light flickered through the water, no longer murky but clear and tropical, and looking to left and right he could see green and blue, scales like feathers and feathers like scales. They were pulling him between them, and it was almost as if he was flying.

He felt around for the pressure gauge that should be dangling off his BCG; but there was no gauge, and no BCG, and he realised with a shock that he was entirely naked. A salt taste in his mouth; salt water, and the current rushing into his lungs and filling them as he inhaled, exhaled, inhaled again. He was breathing, and yet he was underwater, and the depths were wrapped around him. Realisation of the impossibility of the moment sent him panicking for the surface, and he awoke spluttering and choking as, in his mind, soft, caring hands snatched at him, and tried to pull him deeper and deeper into the alien depths.

Next morning, there were too many people on the bus, and then too many on the tube, and he longed to find himself alone in the hushed emptiness of the Thames, or of one of its tributaries. But when he arrived at the station and carded himself in, there was a different kind of silence. Conversation stopped as he entered the main office. A group gathered round a monitor turned to look at him. There was the flicker of a rapidly closing window on-screen. Inspector Larrik was waiting at his desk.

'You'd better come with me, Saul' he said.

Saul followed him into his office.

'Chief, there's something we've got to talk about.'

'Not now, Saul.'

'It's very important.'

'Not as important as this.'

Larrik motioned to Saul to sit down, and then turned his monitor to face him.

'It's about Bushell,' said Saul.

Larrik ignored him.

'I don't know what to say, Saul.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is from last night. Just watch.'

Larrik clicked a button on his keyboard, and the screen filled with the soft, silent tones of CCTV footage, a collage of low resolution greys that made Saul feel like he was looking through murky water at a muddied dream of a world. The timestamp showed 01:00am. The camera was looking down on an empty street. Nothing moved.

'What's the point of this?' said Saul.

A man came into shot, moving purposefully through the murk. He walked down the pavement, crossed the road, then disappeared off the screen. The scene changed to show another view. Saul recognised the location. Another camera; looking down on Bankside, just by Blackfriars Bridge. Stillness again; the Thames-side footpath in the foreground, the black void of the high-tide river behind it, and then the man appeared, still with his back to the camera.

He walked to the low wall that separated the land from the water, and began to undress. First his jacket, then his shirt came off, revealing a dark

pattern writhing across his skin. The camera zoomed in on him; a bored operator becoming alert, realising that something unusual was starting to happen.

‘A tattoo’, said Larrik, as Saul leant in to look more closely at the screen. An eddy of static blurred the image for a moment. The ink was a dark smudge on pale flesh, covering much of the man’s back and reaching around beneath his left arm to his chest. The man took his shoes, socks and then trousers off, building a neatly folded pile of clothes. At last, he was completely naked. He turned to face the camera, and – standing stock still – stared up at it.

Saul gasped, thrown in memory back into Judy’s front room, holding a photograph of another man who – it seemed – was himself. Here too, his own face stared back at him, carved out fish-grey on the cold screen before him.

‘We thought it was you, Saul. Then we realised you don’t have a tattoo.’

Larrik clicked at his keyboard and the image froze.

‘He stands there for a minute or so and then – well, you know what they do.’

The man stared back at Saul, his twin in almost every way. One difference; a great fish’s head swam across his chest, sketched out in sinuous lines that flowed like oriental calligraphy. ‘A catfish’, Saul said to himself, noting the whiskers that hung down from either side of its wide open mouth. Beneath it, just level with the man’s hips, were two other shapes. Saul peered closer, trying to make them out; two steep sided triangles, jagged edged, each with a small square set on top of them. Shapes that were entirely new to him, yet that evoked an overpowering familiarity.

Larrik turned to him and spoke. ‘There was no ID on him, but I think I know who he might be. A place called Cain Hill called the Chief Superintendent with a complaint about you yesterday, and so he called me. And that’s my other problem.’

‘Ah. That’s part of the Bushell investigation.’

‘Don’t bullshit me, Saul, I’m trying to help you. You’re a diver, you don’t do that kind of spadework. And in any case, the Bushell case is closed now.’

‘After three days? And what about his body?’

‘The body has been released to the proper authorities. Dr Alcott saw to that.’

‘Not his wife? What about her?’

‘You’d have to ask the Home Office and the FCO that. I’m sure they’ve spoken to her. But that’s not my problem, Saul. You are. You’ve been using your official status for personal business.’

Saul said nothing.

‘You found your mother, didn’t you? And Bushell, and now this man at Blackfriars – they’re your brothers.’

Larrik’s voice approximated softness.

‘I can’t imagine what it must be like, Saul. And it doesn’t excuse your abuse of your authority. But it does explain it.’

Larrik paused. He seemed to want Saul to say something. There were no words. Outside a photocopier came to life, sighing through the thin wall. In the other direction, the window, then the river, then the sea.

‘You’re lucky. Since the Taylor reforms it’s me that deals with this, not those sods at Professional Standards. I’m putting some words of advice on your record.’

‘Chief, I –’

‘And you’re on compassionate leave. With immediate effect. Go and see your mother, Saul. Your real mother. If she hears about this from anyone, it should be you.’

‘But…’

‘The Welfare Officer will be in touch.’

The conversation had ended there. Saul had tried to raise the Bushell matter again, but Larrik had brushed him off. Judy had seemed as careless, Saul thought; and so he had returned to his desk, and picked up his bag, and found himself on the streets of Wapping at ten-o-clock on a workday. As he left the office, heads had turned to track him, like so many CCTV cameras snatching at a receding life. He didn’t want to return home, and so he found himself on the train, heading again to Teddington.

‘What are you doing here, Saul?’

‘I was worried about you after last night. I thought I’d come and see how you were.’

‘You’d better come in.’

Judy had taken all the photographs down in the

living room.

‘Tea? Or coffee?’

As the kettle boiled it gurgled like a rushing stream. She handed him his mug, and sat down opposite him. Her skin was pale, dark crescents beneath her eyes.

‘How are you?’ he said.

‘It’s been difficult. But it’s getting better.’

‘It must be tough – to lose someone so suddenly.’

‘It wasn’t sudden, Saul. He’d been leaving me – all this – for a long time.’

‘I know how that feels.’

‘Someone close to you?’

Loss comes as evolution, not as a moment, Saul realised, as he described the slow erosion of the families that had accreted around him, and then been stripped away. Lung cancer had taken Raymond, a resolution he’d been working towards for years; each cigarette one more step away from breathing.

Pamela had begun to shed memories soon after, loss hollowing her until all that remained was a dried-out husk of a body and a confused and empty voice, barely present aftershocks of a completed life. And then there had been the slow collapse of his marriage; no single, final moment, but rather a long-drawn out narrative of hurt, and disappointment, and withdrawal.

Now he was learning about this new family through the loss of it. He told Judy about the CCTV footage, about the end of this new brother’s life - her brother-in-law, he realised, as he talked; about his birth mother, locked away in a mental hospital for twenty years or more. She listened to him, nodding occasionally, her eyes locked onto his. As he finished his story, he began to feel ashamed.

‘I’m sorry, Judy. You’ve just lost your husband. I didn’t even know these people.’

‘You knew the dream of them. You must have imagined a family.’

‘I never really thought about where I came from. I just knew I didn’t fit in.’

‘You should go to your mother.’

‘That’s what Larrik said.’

‘He’s right, then.’

‘I can only hurt her.’

‘You haven’t hurt me, Saul.’

The sweat on her had had a salt tang to it, awaking eddies and currents of lust in him, dredging them out and shaping them into great hurricanes of waves, that crashed in against them and overwhelmed them both.

‘You’re the first for a long time’, he said, when they had finished.

‘I know.’

Then he had slept and dreamt of soft hands on him, tugging him through the deep void, until he hung before a small, growing light that shone from below. As it burnt brighter and brighter, vast shapes emerged from the gloom around him - triangles with stepped sides, small cubes atop them, wreathed in the greens and golds of brilliant, vivid deep sea life.

Next morning the bright light of dawn called him from bed. She was already in the kitchen, making coffee. He went to talk to her but she put her finger on his lips and shushed him before he could speak. They kissed again and made love on the floor of the living room. She had turned all the photos of her husband back round to look into the room. Saul imagined a dozen small mirrors. When they had finished, he got dressed. At the door, Judy pulled him close to her, and whispered - ‘I could never say goodbye to him’ then, ‘thank you’. The door closed and he found himself standing in the bright, empty street, birdsong rippling out around him.

‘Annabel doesn’t talk much’, said the nurse, as Saul followed him through a maze of corridors.

‘I’m sorry.’ In fact, he was relieved. Before the visit to Cain Hill he had gone to see Pamela. It had been impossible to make her understand that he was going to see his birth mother, that – all this time – she had been living quietly, just outside Guildford. Pamela was so very detached from anything approaching life, now. ‘I don’t think I want cake’ she had insisted, and then asked Saul to pick up some Senior Service for Raymond.

As he was leaving the hospital, his phone had rung. He had snatched it out of his pocket, thinking it might be Timmy; but it was only Alcott. Saul let him go to voicemail. ‘Thanks for your message. Sorry not to get back before. I’ll be at the mortuary tomorrow night if you want to talk.’ The same clipped urgency; and again the

wheezing under his voice. Saul decided not to call back. The rest of the day was for the living, not the dead.

This time, when he had called Cain Hill, it had been not as a police officer but as himself. He was surprised at how open the staff had been to the idea of his visit. ‘She’d love to see you’, the doctor had said, ‘she doesn’t really have anyone.’ Now a nurse was taking him to her.

‘How is she – in general?’ asked Saul.

‘A bit Syd Barrett. We keep her comfortable’, said the nurse.

‘What does she do?’

‘She paints.’

‘Who pays for it?’

Cain Hill was very elegant, very private, and – no doubt – very expensive indeed.

‘Her parents left a trust fund.’

‘Any other visitors?’

‘There was a brother, once.’

‘My uncle’, Saul thought, the word feeling unfamiliar in his mind.

‘Still, she seems happy enough’ said the nurse, then, opening a door, ‘through here.’

Saul held back for a second.

‘Annabel? There’s someone here to see you’ came from within the room, then ‘Oh! You’ve tidied up very nicely!’, chirped out in the bright, optimistic voice that adults reserve for small children they don’t really know.

There was no reply.

Saul steeled himself, and went in.

He had hardly stepped through the door before he felt a small hurricane of flesh thud into him, arms wrap themselves around him, and then there was someone holding him tighter than he’d ever been held before, surrounding him in a way that seemed at once completely new, and entirely familiar. She was a little shorter than he was, grey hair frizzing out beneath him, a soft wet face pushed into his chest, a strong comfort of a body pressed up against his. She was crying, and he bent his head over hers and she looked up at him, her face jewelled with soft luminous tears.

‘Oh, Saul’, she’d said through convulsive, heaving sobs, more overjoyed at the sight of him than anyone had ever been, ‘I’ve waited such a very long time’, and then ‘I’m so sorry’, a soft, calming mantra that she had repeated again, and again, and again, becoming a little quieter each time until finally she was silent.

Saul had nodded at the nurse, who had left, discreetly locking the door behind himself. Saul had held his mother until she’d sobbed herself out, becoming still against him. One final squeeze, and she was leading him over to an armchair, sitting him down, and then bustling over to a small side table to set a kettle boiling and drop teabags into two mugs.

As the kettle sang in the corner, Saul had his first real opportunity to look around. The room was high ceilinged, with tall windows running down one wall. Outside there was a view of fresh, green grounds, a lawn speckled with white flowers, yellow blooms dancing in flowerbeds, a blue delight of a river in the distance.

Inside, he realised, a blaze of colour as well; an easel in one corner, and a riot of canvases leant up against the walls, against the small, single bed, against every free surface in the room. All held shapes, figures, icons outlined in firm black lines, filled in with brilliant primary colours. He thought of his fish tank back home. It was as if he’d somehow been immersed in it.

‘Saul…’

His mother was trying to speak. She had seemed so fluent when he had arrived, but now that the initial rush of emotion had left her he realised just how hard it was for her to form words, how unpractised her voice had become.

‘I don’t know…’

She was holding a jug of milk in one hand, a bowl of sugar in the other, looking over at him with a desperately pained expression. For a moment he didn’t know what she wanted, then – ‘A little milk. No sugar.’

She beamed beatifically, wrinkles across her face creasing into a thousand tiny smiles –

‘…like me!’ she said, and then turned back, to finish making him his tea.

Warmth from the mug spread through his hands, through all there was of him - his body, and his heart; his soul. And then, slowly, and haltingly, they began to talk.

Later, in Saul’s memory, much of the

conversation would merge with the dream that it triggered, hours later. His mother talked only in short bursts. When she wanted to make a point in more detail, or illustrate a moment, she would go rooting through the canvases that were stacked up all over the room. Some of the images were easy to understand; ‘we lived on a lovely beach’, she said at one point, and showed him a picture all blue and gold, sea and sand and sun, little black figures leaping across it. Others, less so – ‘this is the date of that day’ was glossed by a bafflingly psychedelic image, a dance of cartoon-like crosses and squiggles.

Understood or not, all of her pictures flowed into those later dreams, populating them with a rich bestiary of images; with skulls and heads, sharks and macaws, trees and beaches, waves and deeps. A narrative emerged from her conversation; that narrative too ran into the night, so afterwards he was never quite sure what she had told him and what he had dreamed for himself. But he remembered the moment of realisation, the point at which it became clear that he was learning the story of his, his brothers’ conception. What had been dry research on the web came vividly to life in the telling, for he had begun in the heart of the storm.

‘Paradise’, and images of a soft and perfect beach, of squat stone ruins, of sun beating down from tropical skies. His mother and her companions had frolicked together, Edenic innocents in a world so beautiful that it could only foreshadow a fall. But the frolickings had had a purpose – ‘ritual’ she had said, again and again, ‘transcendence. A calling to summon’, then ‘from beyond.’ There were two main image sets connected with ritual; one had shown a group on a boat, far out at sea – ‘guidance’ – the next the same group before a squat building, beach then sea lapping gently at it. ‘We dance at the gate’.

Her storm paintings caught the moment so vividly that sound lived in them as much as sight. The howl of a thrashing sea; the battering roar of the winds, knife sharp rain cutting through the churning air – ‘oh, the beat of their wings’, she said. The ritual persisted, even in this chaotic void. ‘Guiding them in’, and he could see the small group in a dancing ring on the beach, making themselves a beacon for the hurricane. Then, there was a vision of hush, as the eye of the storm opened itself up, and looked out at the world. ‘The winds and the sea obey.’

The others were entirely abstract in his mother’s images, in his mind; a flicker of blue and gold, complex shapes that never quite resolved into defined glyphs, a presence that effected without ever being really seen. ‘There is only experience’, his mother repeated, again and again, ‘there must be vision’. And, as he slept, always the sense of being surrounded, of being at the heart of a great multitude, as they moved him through the empty city; always the presence, never the sight. ‘You must witness’, then – whispered, from so many mouths - ‘you will.’

Stepped pyramids rose up around him, cubic temples at the top, brilliant scarlet and emerald and topaz and jade colours dancing across them, between them, never quite resolving into form. Each pyramid had its staircase, each staircase its images, laid across the front of each step, and he recognised the style of the glyphs from his mother’s paintings, from – he realised – the tattoo that had shimmered across his brother’s flesh. He found that they encoded the history of a race, for somehow he had learned how to read them; and that story entered into him, and became part of him, memories that he had always possessed, rather than a narrative that he had uncovered.

Those deep race memories ebbed and flowed around him with all the soft swaying of seaweed, revealing then hiding themselves. There was a meteorite; a tidal wave; a hole punched in space and time; an arrival, in flight from events somewhere between a war and a tsunami. There had been the relief of refuge, at first, and then, as those newcomers had established themselves, engagement.

They had given so much to the peoples of the Yucatan; taken so little from them, just a small gift so urgently needed. It was so hard to hold on to this new dimension, to move in it as more than a dream. The angles of this world were so sharp, compared to those of their old one; it was too easy to gently fragment, to lose form and drift away. Many were lost that way. Saul thought of the softness of jellyfish, broken on beaches after storms. But sacrificed blood gifted solidity.

At first, the red kissed the waters. Those others sucked at it with soft mouths, that could only hold form in the salt density of the sea. In return, they gave the dreams that shaped maize, the calendar that regulated all things, the craft of stepped pyramids. Corn-fed cities grew up around those stone machines. When the dates were right, men and women with flat sloping foreheads climbed deep into them, to run stingray spines through tongues, through foreskins.

Each pyramid was a kind of lens, a stone womb for bringing sharpness to life. When sufficient sacrifice was made within them, a new reality came into focus. Vision serpents rose from red pools, snake mouths opening so that green gold gods could step out, dreams reborn with sufficient strength to walk in the tearing air.

And Saul found that he was rising through one of those mouths, chanting, the taste of soft incense in his mouth, as he stood before those human supplicants, feeling their breath rippling at him, and told them how they could seal his people's presence on this earth, what final gifts they would receive in return. There must be children conceived between the two races, living vessels of permanence, the sustaining blood installed at source.

He was such a vessel, he saw, made to carry the preserving gift to his people under the water, and with that in mind he crossed over, and the world changed around him, fully and finally.

When he came to, his mother was holding him. Again the soft impress of her, a new sense of security. 'I've only ever had the memory', she'd said, stroking his hair, 'of this moment, to hold on to.' And then, 'I remember how you will all come back for me'. He didn't know what she meant, but he was crying and at last he let loss pierce his heart, now that he was safe in her arms. 'I tried to paint the three of you, but it wasn't the same.'

'My brothers…', he said, and he felt himself heaving against her, grief breaking and roaring against the cliff that she was, the strength of her love. 'I've lost…' – and it was all in there, all that he had lost, all that he had to bear alone; not just his brothers but his wife, his son, even his adoptive parents; all the soft and yielding dead he had pulled from the river; all the loss in his world breaking out of him. And she held him, and he knew that she would never move, never unwrap herself from around him until he was safe again.

After a while, the storm had blown out, and he felt himself return to calm. She was stroking his hair, his forehead, whispering in his ear, shushing him; and he felt her fulfilment brush against him too, guilt and regret and loss assuaged as at last she could hold and care for her child. Her paintings glowed around him, soft and luminous now as the gathering dusk outside.

'You have not lost your brothers', she said, and his reply: 'I know'. And then he was waking, unsure if she had held him in dream or reality, and there was a gentle brilliance of sun around him, as the light flooded in at the windows, and in a new kind of memory, of a time yet to come, he heard her speak and say 'my boys, you're all with me now'.

All through the rest of that day, other memories of a better life came to him, a life that he had yet to experience. He went to Timmy's school, and as the children came out to play watched his son through the mesh wire fence. The playground ebbed and rushed with joy, as children ran and chased each other, hurtling in shoals across it. Timmy seemed set a little apart. Sometimes he would try to join in, but he could never run quite fast enough, never catch at or kick the ball in quite the right way, never – it seemed – find the instinctive words or gestures that would unlock these small alien rituals to him.

Saul found himself weeping as he watched him, drifting through a complex range of emotions. Sadness suffused him at the thought of the next few years of Timmy's life, the difficulty he would always have fitting in, the sympathy that Alain and Sarah would be so chronically unable to show. But then he remembered the coming reunion, the moment beyond those times, when Alcott would guide Timmy back to him, and father and son would be together again in the world they had been born to move through; and his new family would coalesce around him, Timmy his dry child, and all his wet children. His blood would run through them all, anchoring the alien in this earthly plane.

To his surprise, he realised that Judy would be there too, fully his sister-in-law again, wrapped around a shimmering creature of blues and greens and golds. He knew that they would be deep underwater, and wondered at her survival. Memory shifted to fiction; perhaps these visions were all invention? But the night came down as he was visiting Pamela, saying a final goodbye, and he remembered how the Night Pathologist breathed, and understood how Judy could live with them all, deep beneath the sea.

Later, he was in the mortuary. He had left his adoptive mother with the gift of stillness. Her life had become such a small thing. The Night Pathologist greeted him.

'I thought you'd come here, Saul.'

Something flashed on his neck. Saul realised that the wheezing beneath Alcott's voice wasn't an artefact of a failing phone line, but rather a function of something far richer, far stranger.

'I am sorry about Bushell. But we have to move quickly with these things', he said.

He was bustling around a table at one end of the Mortuary. Bright hard light blazed on white tiles; running water hissed and spattered; there was a reek of muddied, decaying corpse flesh.

'When the seas rise' Alcott continued, 'it'll be much easier. But then, you know that already, don't you?' He turned towards Saul, and said 'I'd shake your hand, but…'

He was wearing thin plastic gloves, streaked in

gore. Red smears across his white coat showed where he had wiped at himself. He was bald, his skin glowing with an almost luminescent pallor. He seemed to be wearing a collar made from filigree-sculptured silver. Light mesh grilles ran up either side of it, and there was a speaker on the front of it.

A red hand gestured towards the machinery, and Alcott's voice came from the speaker, his mouth remaining closed. 'All this – it's the best they can do for me. Of course, you won't need one.'

Saul had used his warrant card to enter the station, and then crept upstairs, avoiding the duty shift. Laughter from the Ward Room, where the river policemen would gather, awaiting a late night call to action. He felt far beyond them now, for he had heard his own call, and obeyed it. Memory showed him the path he would follow.

Now, Alcott was staring at him.

'You can't speak, can you?' said Alcott. 'That's a good sign. And you'll be remembering differently.'

Saul thought about the Night Pathologist's words. Had he just said them, or was he about to say them? It was so difficult to tell. Outside, the river seethed, its call so urgent. But for the moment, he had to ignore it, to stay and tend to his brother. He moved over towards the autopsy table, nodding as he came.

'That is good. On the way to how they feel it.'

Alcott turned back to the corpse. He was playing a high velocity water jet over it. Saul leant over the face. Its features were frayed, bloated; just as with Bushell, he could see no shadow of himself there. Water played across skin, and it began to melt away, revealing a shimmer of green and gold beneath.

'You have to be careful, at the sloughing stage. The true body is still very delicate.'

Alcott moved the jet down, playing it now across the chest, now the groin, now the thighs. Wherever it touched, flesh rushed away like so much mud, revealing something firm and clean and living. A phrase from childhood church services sang in Saul's head; 'de profundis clamavi'. Emerald skin, sun skin, buried far beyond the human, rang out in praise of life as his brother's mortality was dissolved by soft, forgiving water. It felt like a kind of sacrament.

'It is miraculous, Saul, isn't it? It moves me, every time.'

Great lidless eyes emerged, a viridian streamlined head, a forehead sloping back into a pointed skull; and then, on the side of its neck, gills, and Saul understood the gift that the Deep Ones had given Alcott, his sadness at the limits of his humanity. The arms and legs seemed to be longer than human arms, the chest shallower, the limbs more flexible. There was the faintest trace of a fish tattoo, a slightly darker pattern of lines across that new, yellow-green torso.

Alcott rolled Saul's brother onto one side, patted at his back, whispered encouragingly in one ear and then – with a surprisingly quick, well practiced movement – hit him suddenly between the shoulder blades. The Deep One – for that was how Saul thought of him, now, the name seeming so right in his mind – choked once, twice, and then vomited Thames water, spouting it out across the floor, before rolling again onto his back and starting to breathe. With each breath, his gills opened and then sighed closed again, revealing flesh of a startlingly intimate pink.

'He'll sleep now, for an hour or so, and then be ready to move on.'

Saul was lost in contemplation of this new thing, this fresh born creature that was – he knew – an image of his future, a truer version of himself than he had yet managed to achieve.

'That'll be you, soon. You feel it already, Saul, don't you? You feel the future as if it were now.'

Saul felt the future, and the past, too. He remembered all those he had pulled from the river; the moments he'd spent beneath the water with them, the sadness he'd felt as they returned to the land. It had always seemed so wrong to let the dead move away from the water, so they could be lost in the earth or burnt in fire. Now he understood that sense of wrongness, the way in which each recovery had felt, in the end, like a failure. He turned away from the Doctor, and started for the door.

'I'll be seeing you soon, Saul, here, and then – below.'

Then he was away, and down the stairs, and outside the police station. The main door led onto an alleyway; a cordoned off stairway led directly down to the river. There was a CCTV camera over the door. He reached up, and unplugged it. A blank screen would draw less attention than a naked man; and, unlike his brother, he left no-one behind who needed to be shown the way. He moved down the stairs and started to take his clothes off, looking as he did so towards the distant sea. Soon the river would pull him in; soon it would embrace his failed humanity, and help

him move beyond it. In memory, he had already done so.

He pulled back from the future, and let his attention focus on the now. There was only the sound of the water, lapping at wood beneath him. Only the wind, sighing farewell; only the soft and silver moon, picking out waves as they scurried and flowed around and across the tides.

Now he was totally naked, the water cold as he stepped into it, thoughts of the deep roaring in his mind. A new people exploded in his head, a new world to be his, after the stars had come right, the oceans had risen, and the Warm Ones had fallen away; after the water had changed him. A new family of richness and promise; and he slipped beneath the water and was gone, leaving only the endless generations of waves behind him, promising a perpetual togetherness beneath the safe, enfolding seas.