

A dark, atmospheric landscape with a gnarled tree and a person in silhouette. The scene is set against a cloudy, overcast sky with birds flying. The ground is dark and textured, possibly volcanic rock. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

F.G.  
COTTAM

The  
Memory  
of Trees

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THE HOUSE OF LOST SOULS  
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THE WAITING ROOM

# THE MEMORY OF TREES

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F.G. Cottam



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all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely  
coincidental.

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*For Susan Searle 1924–2004*  
*Much loved, greatly missed*

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The letter was printed on a plain sheet of A4 paper and signed at its conclusion with an old-fashioned fountain pen. The signature was legible. The writer was a man named Samuel Freemantle, who described himself as the estate manager. The estate in question, when Curtis subjected it to a Google Earth search, was not so much substantial as it was vast. He thought that Freemantle, despite his courteous tone and the formal approach the letter signified, must be a man with a job that kept him pretty busy.

The estate was owned by Saul Abercrombie and Curtis had, of course, heard of him. Self-made business successes tended to be more flamboyant than those who had inherited their money and Curtis thought of Abercrombie, whenever he saw the tycoon's picture or heard his quotes in the media, as someone happily addicted to the celebrity status his enormous wealth had brought him.

Curtis thought he shared the general view of people who knew Saul Abercrombie only through headlines and sound bites and photo opportunities. He was the warts and all entrepreneur with a business empire embracing everything from a Hollywood film studio to a prestigious brand of single malt whisky. He ran enterprises ranging from a bespoke software company to a road haulage fleet. He had been to prison in his twenties, and in middle age confessed, once he'd conquered it, to a couple years of enslavement to an almost fatal crack cocaine habit.

He had survived that, unapologetic to the point of defiance about his personal extravagance and ravenous appetite for the good life. And good luck to him, people tended to think. He's fallible and honest and, in common with too few people with the talent for becoming rich, he genuinely enjoyed what his money buys him.

There was the charitable foundation and the commitment to ecology and a collection of rare Beatles and Rolling Stones material. McCartney and Mick Jagger had tried and failed to buy back some of the acetates of their early recordings he owned. There was the priceless collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. There was an aircraft hangar-sized garage replete with trophy cars. And, not least, there was a beautiful daughter he very publicly doted on.

Saul Abercrombie's wife, the mother of his jewel of a daughter, had taken her own life. The press account of that event was still vivid a decade on because the manner of the suicide had been so lurid. She had paid the toll and driven halfway across the Severn Bridge and brought her convertible E-type Jaguar to a halt. It had been a beautiful spring day and witnesses said she had been driving in a pink headscarf with the roof down. She clambered up the bridge railings and, without apparent hesitation, threw herself off.

Impact injuries killed her the moment she hit the water. She didn't leave a note. An autopsy report established that she had been in good health. She wasn't taking any medication and, when she jumped, Susan Abercrombie was completely sober.

Curtis folded the letter back into the envelope it had arrived in, rose from his desk and opened the blind to look at the morning as light gathered and strengthened in the sky. He listened to the traffic on the street seven stories below as it swelled in volume towards the beckoning rush hour. And he remembered that Abercrombie's daughter was named Francesca. He couldn't remember where he had seen her picture and he couldn't remember what it was that she did. That was, if she had an occupation. It didn't matter much. With a father like hers she didn't really need to do anything.

The estate Freemantle managed stretched inland from a ragged spread of cliffs on the Welsh Coast. It was sufficiently substantial for parts of it to own individual place names, when Curtis looked. There was Raven Dip and Gibbet Mourning and a place called Loxley's Cross. There was nothing on the map to signify settlement, but the names sounded old. They belonged to places that lived wholly in a past no one had bothered to document. They were of a time remote from factual detail. Maybe they were translations originally from the Welsh. Even what myths they might have engendered had perished through neglectful centuries.

Again, it didn't really matter. Down on the ground there might be a few scattered stones but the paths walked by-ways of these lost hamlets would have vanished entirely. And if Abercrombie's scheme, the scheme described in Freemantle's letter, proved to be feasible, they would be obscured and then consumed and forgotten forever.

Those cliffs at the edge of Abercrombie's domain had an average height of over a hundred feet. They were a vast rampart against the corrosive powers of the sea. But were they a formidable rampart? The practical part of Curtis' mind was already turning to the subject of coastal erosion. He needed to discover whether the cliffs were granite or chalk or predominantly quartz. They might be limestone but he hoped they weren't. He returned to his desk and his computer but before he could switch it on his mobile in his pocket rang.

'Sam Freemantle,' a voice said. 'Did you get my letter?'

'It arrived this morning.'

'Much maligned, the Royal Mail.'

Curtis looked at his watch. 'It's not yet seven thirty.'

'Postmen start work early.'

'I didn't mean that.'

'We rise early too, Mr Curtis, those of us who're slaves to the land.'

'I've no cows to milk or crops to tend, Mr Freemantle. Just because my profession is trees, doesn't oblige me to live in a wood.'

Freemantle chuckled. He was not a Welshman, Curtis didn't think. There was a curl to the vowels, a slight suggestion of the West of England in his dialect. He said, 'I know exactly where you live. I posted you the letter. But you're up with the larks, nevertheless.'

Curtis nodded to himself. This was true.

'Should you have such things as larks, in Lambeth.'

Curtis didn't know whether he did or he didn't. Ornithology was not his speciality.

Freemantle cleared his throat. The small talk had come to its conclusion. He said, 'Do you think it's practical, Mr Abercrombie's scheme?'

'Depends on what you mean by practical,' Curtis said. 'It can be done. It can be successfully achieved.'

'It's sustainable?'

'It can be made sustainable, yes.'

'I'm sensing a "but".'

'It'll be hugely expensive, even if the conditions are ideal. It could be colossally expensive if they're not.'

Freemantle paused. 'With or without you on board, he'll do it,' he said. 'Mr Abercrombie is someone with a lifelong habit of fulfilling his dreams. This dream is going to be no exception.'

'Except in scale,' Curtis said.

'He's totally committed.'

*Maybe he should be committed,* thought Curtis, who'd detected more than a touch of megalomania in the plan baldly mapped in Freemantle's letter. He glanced at his desk, at the mail that had arrived but had not been opened that morning, at the brown envelopes containing bills he knew he would struggle any time soon to pay. It was almost the end of March and he had not worked except in fits and starts since the Salisbury commission of the previous September.

'Will you assist Mr Abercrombie in achieving his dream?'

'I'll come and take a look,' Curtis said.

'Excellent. When can you get here?'

Curtis bit his lip. There was no point in standing on ceremony. Cash was a far more important imperative at this point in his life than point scoring. 'I could come up tomorrow.'

'Today would be better,' Freemantle said. 'But I suppose tomorrow will have to do. And you'll need to stay the night.'

'You can't treat this as something doable in the blink of an eye,' Curtis said.

'I know that,' Freemantle said. 'I've spent the bulk of my life outdoors. I've never come across a scheme remotely like this one. It's almost a reversal of nature.'

'It's more in the way of restoration,' Curtis said.

Freemantle's tone, when he replied, was suddenly more relaxed. 'That's how Saul sees it too. I'm not sure I agree. Do you really restore something after a thousand years? Surely you recreate it,' he said.

'I'm not a philosopher,' Curtis said, scratching the stubble on his jaw. 'Not at seven thirty in the morning I'm not.' So the land manager was on first-name terms with the man employing him.

'One more thing,' Freemantle said. 'Keep all of this to yourself.'

'It won't be a project you can exactly hide. Not if it goes ahead. It'll practically be visible from space.'

'Just the same, please speak of it to no one. Scheme, scale, logistics, projected cost – all of that remains a secret. Are you someone capable of discretion?'

'This isn't espionage we're talking about.'

'Answer the question.'

'I've never courted gossip in my life.'

'Good. I'll email you a set of map coordinates. There's an eight-foot barbed-wire fence strung along the entire landward perimeter. There are gates for access, obviously.'

'Go on.'

'The coordinates will put you outside the western access point. I'll have keys to the gate they've couriered to you this afternoon.'

'All the way from Pembrokeshire?'

'Saul Abercrombie has a London office. And we were fairly confident you'd take the job.'

'Why not just meet me at the gate?'

'Don't want to prejudice your first impressions. When you've had a bit of time to have a good look around, we'll come and find you.'

Curtis calculated that he could comfortably arrive at his destination by 11 a.m. the following morning. Freemantle said, 'At the wheel of a Land Rover, I assume?'

'You'd be disappointed if I was driving anything else,' Curtis said.

But he drove down in the Saab. It was quicker and less thirsty. The Land Rover was garaged, having failed its MOT, and he hadn't had the money since it failed to put right the faults. He assumed Freemantle would be equipped anyway with the sort of off-road vehicle suited to a thorough tour

the site. If the weather was fine – and the forecast was good – they'd probably do it on quad bike. ~~Nouveau-riche landowners generally had a stable full of those.~~

Evidently Saul Abercrombie was an impatient man. He would have to get used to the fact that his dream couldn't be realized as quickly as he seemed to wish. He would have to accommodate a huge workforce and massive material disruption. On the other hand, the timing, seasonally, could not really have been better. It was spring, the time of growth and life and regeneration in nature; the time of warmth and fecundity returning to the land and the warming and softening soil beneath its surface.

Curtis had his sample and analysis kit in a canvas grip on the seat beside him. He would need that gear. He also had a freshly pressed suit in a suit bag carefully folded into the Saab's boot. He didn't know whether Freemantle's invitation to stay the night at the estate involved dinner with its master. But he thought it might and wanted, if it did, to observe the necessary courtesies. His formal shoes were polished and he'd even packed a necktie. The truth was that he needed this job pretty desperately.

He drove with the picture in his mind of dinner, of a candelabra-lit baronial hall; Abercrombie and the lissom Francesca seated at a huge table heaped high with dishes, cooling under glittering metal domes as an army of discreet staff served them, Freemantle a red-faced figure in hairy tweed blushing as he twisted his cap between ruddy hands, standing awkwardly on.

It wouldn't be like that, of course. Saul Abercrombie was self-made and the land manager referred to him by his Christian name. He was a man with a bohemian history and a famously common touch and his daughter would be busily occupied in some exotic and exclusive part of the world a cultural universe away from rural Wales. But the speculation passed the time, diverted him from the motorway monotony of the journey. And Curtis was more relaxed during the four hours his journey took for having packed his suit and scrupulously polished shoes.

He naturally wondered why they had selected him for the job. It was possible he was among a handful of arboreal specialists shortlisted and that this was just a preliminary audition. But his phone conversation with the land manager had suggested otherwise. He was their man, wasn't he?

He did have some experience of large projects, carried out on-budget and with successful results. Despite this track record, he had no real media profile, which apparently suited Freemantle and, given the nature of the project, the frankly absurd condition of confidentiality insisted upon by his boss.

But he thought probably his bloodline had been the clincher in getting him the job, rather than any professional qualification or career achievement. That would have been the deciding factor when they looked at their shortlist and selected his name from the three or four he imagined would have been written down there.

His father had been Welsh, born in Barmouth in the autumn of 1948. And his father, in common with his own ancestors, had been a fisherman who lived and died in the Kingdom of Wales. True, Curtis had not been born in Wales, but he could have played rugby for the country had he possessed any aptitude or appetite for the game, and that tended to be the populist qualification on which the nationality of Welshmen was these days judged.

You could not transform the character of so vast a tract of Welsh land in the way that the Englishman Saul Abercrombie intended to. Not without the person orchestrating that transformation having a blood bond with the land undergoing the upheaval, you couldn't.

The days of burning weekend cottages owned by English visitors seemed thankfully to have gone. But Wales was still a nation in some important regards and it would be only pragmatic for Abercrombie to employ a Welshman to oversee this job. Some would see it as a violation, however handsomely the justification was dressed up. It would be a provocation too far for some of the local population for that violation to be committed by an Englishman.

He reached the western gate on foot. The Saab was fine until the narrow road he was on petered into a lane and then a rutted track. But when the track became rough ground the car didn't have the clearance for the terrain. By that point the fence securing Abercrombie's land was in sight, a quarter of a mile distant. He could see the evenly placed wooden stanchions and the sunlit glitter of its steel thorns. He picked his workbag off the passenger seat and locked the car door behind him.

He used the single key couriered to him the previous afternoon to open the heavy padlock securing the gate. Having entered the estate, he paused and looked around and listened, but there was no one there to meet him. He would have seen them over the flat expanse of wild grass rippling greenly in the breeze.

Curtis was aware of how quiet it was. Birdsong came with hedgerows and bushes and the branches of trees in which to nest and perch and there were none of those here. The land was not exactly flat, however. That was an impression given by the openness and scale of what he viewed from where he stood, an illusion strengthened by the vacant expanse of the sky. He was in Wales, not Kansas. The ground undulated beneath its verdant carpet of grass. There were no trails, though, beaten and worn by trampling feet as clues to which direction to take.

He walked for about half an hour. He'd walked in Wales before, but in Snowdonia and the Black Mountains and on the coastal stretch of land between Barmouth and Cader Idris. They were locations characterized by dramatic and even majestic landmarks. This was a wilderness – empty, almost featureless. When eventually he stopped, it was because, practically speaking, he was lost.

He looked around. Slightly to the north-west of where he stood, on a bearing that he reckoned would eventually take him to the cliffs and the sea, he noticed then the smudge of something that looked man-made. It was slate grey and solid and unmoving, but the lie of the land prevented him from seeing more than a fraction of it, low and perhaps a couple of miles distant. He began to walk toward it. It seemed the logical thing for him to do.

He was quite close to this building before the contour of the land exposed more of it and it was finally resolved into a small chapel or church. It was too plain to be a folly. He was only five hundred metres away when it revealed its detail fully as a place of worship built from stone in what he assumed were Saxon times. It was square in shape and a squat single storey only in height.

The studded oak wonder of a door looked original to this building when he reached it. It was blackened by time and exposure but still carried the scars of the primitive tools that had fashioned it in faith. When he pushed it, it creaked open on iron hinges and the cool smell of the church interior was a sudden, stony contrast to the sweet grass smell of the spring morning outside.

Gloom enveloped him. His eyes adjusted to it. He became aware of the one light source in the room beyond the gaps cleaved as narrow as archery slits at even spaces in the masonry.

This was a stained-glass window. It was high to his left and the angle of the sun through it cast shimmering lozenges of light on the wall opposite. There was enough light, now his eyes had grown accustomed, to see that the interior of the church was denuded of any furnishings. There was no altar, no pulpit, no benches in cramped rows or bolsters on which to kneel and pray. There were no lamps. There were no pictures hung or candles in holders to light. The church interior lacked a font. There was just the flagged stone floor and that one ornamental window to look upon, and so he did, studying its detail.

It was not religious in subject matter. If anything, Curtis thought, it might actually be construed as slightly blasphemous.

The window was tall and narrow and arched. It pictured a knight, bareheaded, clad in silver armour. His war horse stood tethered to a sapling with its head bowed to his rear. From his right hand,

bloodied broadsword trailed, its tip buried in the ferns growing lushly around his feet. In the grip of his left fist, his arm extended, he held a severed head by its hair. Its eyes had risen to white blankness in its face in death. It was not human, this grisly trophy displayed by the knight in the stained-glass window. It was twice as large as any human head Curtis had ever seen. And its skin was ridged and coarsened with scales.

‘Man, that’s one ugly motherfucker,’ a voice from behind him said.

Curtis jumped at the sound of the voice and turned and recognized the facial features of Saul Abercrombie contorted into a grin. He looked pleased with himself at the shock he’d just inflicted. ‘Relax, brother,’ he said. He nodded up at the window. ‘The bad guy looks pretty dead to me. Dude in the steel suit saw to that.’

‘Do you know who they are?’

‘It’s a thousand years ago,’ Abercrombie said. ‘People float theories. But guesswork is bullshit. Truth is, nobody knows.’ He put out a hand and Curtis shook it. ‘Saul,’ he said.

‘Tom Curtis.’

‘Yeah, I know. My tree guy.’

‘Only if I pass the audition.’

Abercrombie was slightly shorter than he looked in pictures. He was grey-bearded with white, wavy hair he wore at the same shoulder length he had in the famous picture of his arrest at the Red Lion Square demo back in the early seventies, when his tresses had been a youthful shade of brown. He was wearing a wrinkled blue linen suit, the trousers belted with a knotted club tie. His feet were laced in sneakers. He looked like he always looked, except that on his head was perched a pair of old-fashioned leather aviator goggles, their round glass lenses framed in circles of brass.

He said, ‘I already like the vibe you give off, Tom. I’m rarely wrong about people. We’re simpatico, the two of us. Everything is going to be cool, trust me.’

Curtis heard an engine approaching outside. Because he owned one himself, he knew it belonged to a Land Rover.

Abercrombie cocked his head at the sound. ‘My principle gofer, Sam,’ he said. ‘Quad bikes on the trailer. You and me, Tree Man, are going to take the tour.’

Thus the steampunk goggles, Curtis thought, smiling to himself. There was something slightly pantomimic about Saul Abercrombie. But the man could afford to play the fool, couldn’t he, having proven so conclusively over the years he was anything but. And he was likeable. Curtis realized with surprise that despite all of the reservations and prejudices he’d brought with him to Wales, he’d like his potential new employer immediately.

‘What is this place, Saul?’

Abercrombie adjusted the goggles over his eyes before answering. Outside, Curtis could hear Freemantle lower a ramp or running boards from the trailer to the ground to unload the bikes.

‘The church is nameless,’ Abercrombie said, blinking. ‘It’s lost, like the identity of the guy who won the argument up there in the window. The spot we’re on is known as Raven Dip. It’s a natural depression, the reason you have to get up close to recognize the building we’re in for what it is.’

‘I saw Raven Dip on the map,’ Curtis said. ‘I studied the lie of the land on my laptop yesterday. I didn’t see any sign of buildings at all.’

‘Google Earth?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re shitting me.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Which goes to prove, you can’t trust anyone,’ Abercrombie said, slapping him on the back and steering him towards the door in a single deft movement of his hand.

The quad bikes gleamed like alien and bulbous toys on the ground outside the old building, the Land Rover already distant, its trailer sashaying when Curtis looked, over the bumps and through the depressions of the ground on the route back to wherever it came from.

The estate occupied a tract of land that stretched seaward to an area of the Pembrokeshire coastline between Fishguard and Aberaeron. That finite boundary was made up of eight miles of cliffs. They ranged in height from about seventy feet to over 200 in a couple of places, undulating smoothly rather than raggedly because this part of the coastline was not prey to the erosion, Abercrombie told him that plagued the eastern shoreline of Britain, ravaged as it was by the North Sea.

They toured the perimeter, travelling counter-clockwise. They stopped only when they reached where Abercrombie announced was the tallest of his sea-facing promontories, the one offering the best view out west over the water in the direction of Ireland and, beyond that, six thousand miles away, the Eastern Seaboard of the United States.

They were quiet for a moment, seated on the bikes, Curtis enjoying the relative peace after the belligerent roar of their engines, aware after a few moments of the rhythmic wash of the surf on the shore a fairly remote distance beneath them.

Abercrombie sniffed and lifted his goggles up on to his head. He looked skyward and said, ‘Is salt a serious downer? In the rain, I mean, at the edge of the sea?’

‘It’s a common enough fallacy,’ Curtis said. ‘But most of your clouds coming from offshore will have gathered above the Irish land mass. Even if they hadn’t, clouds don’t carry salt in damaging concentrations. Drench would be a problem. Persistent sea spray could afflict the soil. But everything on your land is so far above sea level it nullifies all that.’

‘Anything else that should be costing me sleep?’

‘The depth and pH balance of the soil. Mature root systems will undermine the cliffs if the soil isn’t there to sufficient depth.’

‘You’ll measure all of that shit, right?’

‘I’ll do all the testing necessary,’ Curtis said. ‘But I’m reasonably confident, having seen what you’ve shown me, that your plan’s achievable. The scale is pretty awesome. But we’re only really putting back what was originally there.’

Abercrombie was quiet for such a long time that Curtis thought perhaps he hadn’t heard this last remark. There wasn’t much wind to snatch away his words. But men of his new boss’s vintage were sometimes a little deaf. Then, quietly, Abercrombie said, ‘When was the last time you were allowed to see your daughter?’

‘It’ll be four months on Tuesday.’

‘Bummer.’

‘I’m surprised you know about that.’

‘You shouldn’t be. I like to know everything significant about the guys I hire.’

‘Is it significant?’

‘On a project this size, everything is that could put it in jeopardy. Anyway, it sounds like a bitch of a problem.’

‘It’s my problem.’

‘And the reason you want this gig so bad.’

‘I thought we were simpatico?’

‘Tree Man, it’s not confined to you and me.’

‘I want access to my daughter. Her mother’s putting every possible obstacle in the way of me seeing her. We’re unmarried, so my rights are limited. Litigation is expensive and I’ve no savings. You’re right, I need this job. I need it far too badly to be likely to fuck it up.’

‘My worry is you’ll convince yourself the project’s feasible, even if it isn’t,’ Abercrombie said. ‘You’ve just admitted you’re desperate for the bread.’

‘I’ll do my tests. I’ll tell you the objective truth when I’ve done them. Right now, things look promising, but I won’t lie to you, Saul. What would be the point? If we begin this and it fails, I’ll be unemployable.’

‘You got that right, Tree Man.’

‘What’s your budget?’

‘It stretches somewhere slightly north of fifty million pounds.’

‘You won’t need anywhere near that much.’

‘It’s there if I do,’ Abercrombie said. He turned to look behind them, at all the grassy wilderness he owned.

‘It’s an awful lot of what you call bread.’

‘Yeah, it’s a chunk of change, all right. What can I tell you, Tom?’ Abercrombie said, laughing. ‘I like trees.’

He liked them so much that he was going to oversee their planting across every part of this vast Welsh acreage. He was going to return to it the character the land had possessed in the Dark Ages when England and Wales and Ireland too had been covered in dense, deciduous forest.

They had cleared it first for their settlements and then for their by-ways and then for cultivation. In the end, they had cleared it because cleared land seemed to them a symbol of civilization and forests the home of outlaws or just the gloomy refuge of magic and barbarism. They had chopped and hacked and burned in the name of progress until only a few areas of forest remained as a precious legacy to be nurtured and preserved in modern times by professional conservationists.

Saul Abercrombie wanted to reverse that process. He wanted to restore his domain to the virgin woodland it had been a thousand years ago. And he didn’t want to do it by planting saplings and watching them grow through patient decades. The stealth approach didn’t work for him. He was seventy years old. He had neither the decades nor the patience in him for stealth. He wanted a mature forest rightfully restored on a gigantic scale and had set aside north of fifty million pounds to see that ambition realized.

‘Ash and elder,’ Abercrombie said. ‘Yew, chestnut, oak, sycamore and beech.’

*He talks like a hippie*, Curtis thought, *and this is his mantra*. He wants to build something profound and unprecedented. It will be wild and beautiful and his spectacular legacy. That was what Curtis supposed he had meant when he’d said the project went beyond whether the two of them could run along all right together. He was a man for whom getting what he wanted was a lifelong habit. And he wanted nothing more than for his forest kingdom to be successfully realized.

As though reading his mind, Abercrombie said, ‘Broadleaf, brother, as far as the eye can see.’ Then ‘Where will you source the trees?’

Curtis had thought about that. Of course he had. There were plenty of heavily wooded areas on the British coastline doomed by erosion caused by the sea. Blackgang Chine on the Isle of Wight was one such spot. If someone was prepared to take the physical risk and organize the engineering and logistics, who would not be pleased to see those threatened trees on the precipice there saved and replanted?

More cynically, there were lumber companies in Canada and the United States who would do almost anything to improve their compromised ecological credentials. They would get the same tonnage dollars from Abercrombie that they would get from customers looking to turn the wood into floors and furniture and roof joists. They wouldn't get the same kudos, though. They'd bend over backwards to facilitate him.

Curtis explained all this. He did so once the quad bikes had taken them back to Abercrombie's house, located about half a mile from the sea, towards the southern extremity of his land.

The house would have been a surprise had he not Google-Earthed it the previous day. It was modern, made mostly of wood from what Curtis assumed was a sustainable source. There were solar panels on the gentle slope of its roof. It was a spacious, handsome, two-storey affair, but even the most hyperbolic of estate agents would have blushed when calling it a mansion.

Abercrombie had mansions. He had homes in Barbados and London and British Columbia and they were far grander than this one was. Curtis had the intuition it might be razed and obliterated when the forest reached completion. The integrity of the forest would not be compromised by something so modern and man-made. What a lonely construction that would make of the Saxon church, with its gory, stained-glass mystery, six or seven miles to the north-east of where they sat, the sun descending on lawn chairs at a garden table to the rear of the property.

Unless Abercrombie planned to have the church razed too, of course. The church was an ancient monument and its stones had once been sanctified. But you could do such things, couldn't you, when you were in the business of playing God.

They were sipping beer. That had turned out to be the second and less pleasant of two surprises. The first, welcome surprise had been Saul's daughter, Francesca, exiting the house through the kitchen door and delivering their chilled bottles and iced beer glasses on a tray. She smiled and was introduced to Curtis, who stood and shook her hand. She was dressed in jeans and a blue cardigan but her thought was probably cashmere over a plain white shirt. The breeze blew a tress of her hair across her face and she lifted a languid hand and brushed it away. She was one of those tall and slender women who move like liquid.

Her father asked her if she would join them, but she said she was working on something she was vague about in what she called the studio. She was as beautiful and as graceful in life as her pictures suggested she would be. With his counter-cultural phraseology and Artful Dodger manner of delivering it, there was something of the East End still about Saul. Francesca, by contrast, sounded like the product of a Surrey boarding school.

The unnerving surprise was the brand of beer Francesca had delivered him. Abercrombie's was Heineken. Curtis was served a Hoegaarden.

'How did you know?'

Abercrombie chuckled. 'That you have a taste for Weiss beer? Knowledge is power, friend.'

'I'm flattered and all,' Curtis said. 'But really, how did you know?'

'If you value your privacy, brother, don't shop online.'

'You've had me spied on?'

'Assessed,' Abercrombie said. 'Secure Internet connectivity is an oxymoron, Tree Man. When it comes to privacy, the web is one faithless fucking bitch.'

A man exited the house and joined them, then. Dusk was gathering and he looked huge before he got close, loping over on light feet to where they sat and the detail of his clothing and features were properly resolved. He was shaven-headed and about six-four, dressed in camouflaged fatigues. And Curtis endured a third surprise, because he suddenly knew he'd had Sam Freemantle all wrong.

Deliberately so, he thought. Freemantle on the phone had just played on his preconception planting assumptions, toying with him. He was nothing to do with tweed and twelve-bores; with partridge shoots and baiting traps to catch hares. His prey, should he hunt, was much more likely to be of the human variety. His claim to having spent the bulk of his life outdoors was probably true but had also been deliberately ambiguous.

He was Saul's security and didn't look to Curtis of the cut-price variety that gave the trade a bad name. Physically, he looked like he could create some serious carnage in the second row of a rugby scrum. But his body language suggested ex-military. Curtis would have bet what little money he had on that.

He nodded and smiled at Curtis and said, 'Everything OK, Saul?'

'Go and grab yourself a beer,' Abercrombie said to him.

To Curtis, Freemantle said, 'I took the liberty of locating your car and bringing up the things you left in the boot. In case you need them, I mean.'

'I left my car locked,' Curtis said. But this remark went ignored.

'I assume you'll stay the night?' Abercrombie said.

'I'd be delighted to stay.'

'Go and grab that beer,' Abercrombie said to Freemantle. 'And bring me and Tree Man here another fresh one apiece.'

The three men talked. Curtis learned that his host had started buying the land he owned here in parcels twenty years ago. The bulk of it had belonged, ironically, to the Forestry Commission. They had planned to cultivate conifers on it but had enjoyed such success with their planting in Snowdonia and the Scottish Highlands that the site had never been brought into productive use. There had never really been sufficient demand.

Ten years ago, when he finally owned the whole area that was originally covered by the forest he wanted to re-create, Abercrombie had everything on it ploughed under and then just left it to lie fallow for a full decade before embarking upon his scheme.

Curtis said, 'How do you know the size and shape of what was here a thousand years ago?'

'There are written accounts. There are illustrated maps. They contain place names. The places haven't moved. There's enough information to feed into a computer for fairly exact analysis. There are 3D software packages that can model to scale.'

'And computers are one of your strengths.'

'They are, Tree Man; it would be futile to deny it.'

'Raven Dip is kind of self-explanatory,' Curtis said. 'Ravens were common enough in medieval times.'

'If an omen of bad luck,' Freemantle said.

'And there's a depression there in the ground,' Curtis said. 'Gibbet Mourning intrigues me, though. It sounds positively ominous.' To Abercrombie, he said, 'Could you tell me about it?'

'I can do better than that, Tree Man,' Abercrombie said, squinting at the descending sun. There was still some light in the sky but it was diminishing at a stealthy creep. 'Sam here can treat you to the guided tour.'

'Now?'

'Sure.'

'It's going dark.'

'Be cool, Tree Man. It's ten minutes away, a stroll in the park. Sam knows the land like he knows his favourite lady of the night, every curve and hollow. The quads have headlights and you'll be back

in time for dinner. Chill, baby, is my advice. Take the trip. Go with the flow.'

Curtis didn't know why he lacked the appetite to the extent he did for this excursion. He'd liked Abercrombie on meeting him and the initial impression hadn't really altered. A man investing the money he was, in the project he planned, had the right to learn what he could about his prospective project manager. It was disconcerting that he'd learned the personal stuff he had, but not sinister or offensive, given the circumstances. A lot was at stake.

And he was comfortable enough in Freemantle's company. The man was probably expert in half-dozen methods of killing an antagonist silently and unarmed. He was huge and oddly nimble in his movements. But he was intelligent and possessed a sly sense of humour and he'd been courteous so far to the point of genial. Curtis knew he didn't pose a threat to Freemantle; to the esteem in which Abercrombie obviously held his to-do guy on the ground, or to his position in the general scheme of things. He wasn't the enemy.

So what was it?

It was that stained-glass window in the tiny church. More specifically, it was the dripping trophy held by the knight who had despatched whatever the severed head had belonged to in life. It was grotesque and oddly real. Medieval artisans had been schooled in allegory, were well versed in the power of myth. But there was something about that giant, scaly head that looked authentically taken from life. It had spooked him.

They were about fifteen minutes away from the house when Freemantle signalled with a wave of his hand that they should stop and killed his engine. Here we go, Curtis thought, with a flutter of trepidation in his heart and his lovely daughter's face imprinted, smiling, on his mind.

They took off their helmets. Freemantle tossed his on to the ground, where it bounced silently and then lay still. Curtis cradled his own helmet in his lap. He hoped this pause in their progress would not be a long one. Gibbet Mourning awaited them and the darkness was gathering all around.

'He's dying,' Freemantle said. 'Cancer of the throat. Inoperable. He's been given eight months. He's a stubborn bastard and will probably stretch that out to a year, knowing him. But his number's up. He'd love to go out on something substantial. That's why you're here.'

'You're attached to him.'

'I'd take a bullet for him. He's full of shit, but then you get to know him, and I have. Fuck him all around, Tom, and you'll have me to deal with. I can be nice. I can also be the opposite of nice.'

'I need the money.'

'I know.'

'I'm good.'

'I know. Saul thinks you're the best and I wouldn't argue.'

'And I'm Welsh.'

'Kind of Welsh,' Freemantle said. 'Welsh enough.'

'Anything else?'

'Keep away from the daughter. I watched her from the house doing her barmaid cameo earlier. She likes you. At least, she's intrigued. Why wouldn't she be? You're a good-looking young bloke and you've got that bruised thing going on some women find appealing. Steer clear, Tom, is my advice.'

'Well. Thanks for your advice.'

'Take it.'

Curtis put his helmet back on, fastened the chin strap and kicked the bike under him back into life.

There was little light left now and when he noticed the object growing in size and solidity in the middle distance he thought it might be a farm beast, a horse or bullock lying in the wilderness on a

side. When they got closer, he saw that it was both much bigger and less dense than a living creature. ~~The object was the whorls and twists of a thorn bush, a vicious spread of pain waiting to inflict itself on anyone who got too close to it.~~

‘We’re here,’ Freemantle said. ‘Welcome to Gibbet Mourning.’

A wary dozen feet away from where its barbed tendrils reached out to him, Curtis studied the bush. He said, ‘I thought the land had been ploughed under a decade ago?’ Some of the branches were as thick as his fist. The thorns were curved and cruel, sharp, horny protrusions two or three inches long. He said, ‘How did this thing get here?’

‘You’re the agricultural expert. You tell me.’

‘Air-borne pollen,’ Curtis said, sniffing the air, looking around at the dark spread of land. The landscape stretched featureless in every direction.

‘If you say so,’ Freemantle said.

‘Except that it looks like it’s been here for a long time,’ Curtis said. ‘Nothing could grow to that size in a single decade, I don’t think. Nothing indigenous, anyway. It looks mature.’

What it looked like, he thought, was ancient. And malevolent. He shivered. He didn’t think he liked Gibbet Mourning very much. There was something dismaying about the spot. Isolated places do that. Sometimes feel desolate just after sunset, a feeling that was really just momentary grief in the person stranded in them for the light recently lost. It was probably a human instinct that survived from prehistoric times, when primitive man was not confident when darkness fell that the sun would ever return.

But it was more than that. Something impended in the silence there, like an unresolved threat. And Curtis felt the self-consciousness of a man being watched. But the scrutiny he sensed did not come from Freemantle, who was looking, like he was, at the great, squat complication of the bush.

‘Watch this,’ Freemantle said. He took a few slow steps forward, towards the bristling thorns. And the bush at once began to rustle and shiver, its horny weaponry glimmering under the moonlight with movement. Freemantle pressed on. And the thick limbs of the bush trembled and stiffened with sound weirdly similar to an intake of breath.

Freemantle stopped. He was close enough to touch the tips of the foremost thorns. But he didn’t do that. He walked away from the bush, backwards, warily, until he was parallel with Curtis, where he stopped. When he spoke, his voice was low and had a confidential quality, as though he was afraid of being overheard.

‘I was on a manoeuvre back in the day when the objective was to evade capture living rough. That was in rural Lincolnshire. I found some outbuildings on a derelict airfield and, beggars not being choosers, bedded down for the night in one of them, an old Nissen Hut. I was woken by weeping, Tom and there was nobody there to do it. The sound was terrible, like agony stretching back from someone wretchedly dead. I fled the place, ended up sleeping in the rain in a dry drainage ditch under a stolen tarp, having put some serious miles between me and the weeping.

‘I later learned the airfield was used by fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain. The Few?’

‘Go on.’

‘Average age nineteen. Average flying time before they clambered into a Spitfire cockpit on a combat mission, ten hours. Mortality rate at the height of the battle, sixty per cent.’

‘Your point?’

‘They were kids. They weren’t ready for death. And I heard one of them lamenting his own short life, nearly seventy years after it was taken from him.’

‘You think this place is haunted?’

‘I think some places have trouble escaping their own past. I don’t like it here. I don’t much care for

Raven Dip. I don't think you did, either.'

Curtis thought Freemantle had got that about right. He wasn't surprised, particularly, at the lie taken by the man. Most old soldiers were superstitious and most of the ones that were, when encouraged, could tell a personal story or two to substantiate what they believed.

Gibbet Mourning was an uncomfortable place. The thorn bush was ugly and odd and its great size alone would make it seem sinister. But take to it with a flame-thrower and in twenty minutes there would be nothing left but a large scorch mark on innocent ground. And anyway, the conversation Freemantle was steering him towards was not one he was prepared to have.

He didn't need spectral setbacks. He needed the money to be able to go to court and win the right to see his seven-year-old daughter. He needed this commission, which was of so high profile a nature that it would make his name and propel him to the forefront of his esoteric profession. He would fulfil a dying man's dream in the process.

And hadn't Freemantle said that was what he wanted, too?

The bush bristled noisily across its entire substantial length and height, rattling and shifting in a sinuous way the wind could never accomplish. There was no wind. The fancy capered into his mind that it had heard him think about burning it and was bristling now in an ugly show of defiance.

'Come on,' he said to Freemantle. 'Let's go back. I'm done with Gibbet Mourning.'

Dinner was a relaxed affair after their quad bike jaunt. It was cooked by a pretty young orient woman Abercrombie introduced as Jo. Judging by the number of dishes and the speed with which they were produced, Jo had some assistance in the kitchen. Either that or she was a magician. The food was a fusion in character and the wines accompanying it expensive, and it occurred wryly to Curtis that he hadn't been asked whether he had any special dietary requirements because his host already knew the answer to that question.

They ate in a spacious dining room. It was stark and rather modern, the only suggestion of flamboyant wealth provided by the paintings hung on the walls. They were originals and some of the names were very recognizable, even to someone as ignorant about art as Curtis considered himself.

Francesca joined them. She hadn't changed out of what she'd worn earlier, but she had put her hair up and her pearl earrings lusted blue in her lobes when she moved her head on her elegant neck. The whole effect was pleasing enough to remind Curtis of the warning Freemantle had earlier given him. The bodyguard – except he was more than that – proved the point by eating with them too. And when Curtis dragged his eyes away from Francesca and looked at him across the table, he was treated to a glower he thought he probably deserved.

Saul Abercrombie entertained them until the meal was finished with episodes from his life. They were raucous tales of Jagger and Richards and Bonham and Plant and other members of the rock aristocracy from the debauched period of their pomp. Hollywood figured in Nicholson and Dunaway and De Niro, except he referred to everyone by their first names and you had to work out from the time frame and locations the person he was talking about.

It wasn't hard to do this. But it was scandalous and shocking stuff; at least to Curtis. He was entertained and genuinely amused but couldn't help wondering how often Freemantle had been forced to endure these boastful anecdotes. And Francesca must have grown up with it all. She would probably be able to recite her father's outrageous stories by heart.

When the coffee had been drunk, somehow, gently, they got on to the subject of his daughter.

'She's called Charlotte,' Curtis said.

Freemantle said, 'Are you one of those Fathers for Justice?'

‘No. There are strategies other than protesting on top of a crane in a Superman suit.’

Francesca smiled at him when he said that and said, ‘Come with me, Tom. There’s something in my studio I want you to see.’

He followed her out of the dining room, Freemantle’s eyes burning like twin lasers into his back. His mind. He followed her all the way to a door at the rear of the house and then into a separate building with a roof made entirely of glass.

‘I paint using natural light,’ she explained, switching on a row of fluorescents so that they could see in the darkness. Her work was figurative, he saw from the drawing half completed on her easel. It was a boy flying a kite on a beach and to Curtis it looked very accomplished. She began to flick through a pile of stretched canvases leaning against the far wall.

‘Mostly I paint from photographs,’ she said. ‘The one I brought you here to see, I did from life.’ She paused, then pulled out a smallish canvas, a picture about three feet high and two across in size. It was a portrait, the head and shoulders of a man, and if the hair had not been so long, Curtis would have been looking at a mirror image of himself.

‘You don’t recognize it?’

‘It looks like me.’

She frowned. ‘I understood you went there today. It’s the knight from the window in the church at Raven Dip.’

‘I’ll take your word for that,’ Curtis said. ‘I didn’t really scrutinize his features. I was paying more attention to the head he was holding in his fist.’

‘You could be twins,’ Francesca said. ‘It struck me straight away. I’m amazed my father didn’t comment on it.’

‘Maybe he missed it.’

‘Don’t be fooled by the stoner vocabulary. He misses nothing. And it’s an uncanny likeness.’

‘Uncanny,’ Curtis said, the word sounding as hollow as he suddenly felt.

Curtis spent the whole of the following morning busily engaged with his tests. The soil was nutrient-rich as he'd expected it to be. Most of it, for most of its life in the millennium since the clearance of the original forest, had been wilderness. The land had not been worked to exhaustion under rotated crops.

It was rich in minerals and moist, a dark, loamy earth that would support the root systems of mature trees ideally. The cliffs, geologically, were a spine separating the sea from the land. A few metres inland from their granite bedrock the stone gave way to clay. And it was clay that lay under the three feet or so of soil covering the entirety of the area to be re-forested.

Even at the cliffs, the soil was six or seven feet deep a stride inland from the edge. Good enough for a few trees. The forest would flourish to their very brink, as it had, apparently, in ancient times, when he imaged one or two huntsmen chasing deer or boar perhaps, experiencing surprise as their last living emotion as they blundered upon the sheer drop down to the shore.

He'd have to brush up on his climbing skills. Recovery of the raw materials from the threatened places at the coastal areas he'd talked about meant abseiling and he hadn't abseiled in a few years. His head for heights was cool enough. The rest was just checking and re-checking your gear because most abseiling fatalities were caused by carelessness in failing to notice that pitons weren't securely hammered home or that ropes had frayed.

He surveyed the land from the seat of a quad bike, stopping occasionally, still somewhat numbed by the sheer scale of the enterprise envisioned by Saul Abercrombie. He began to calculate in his mind the manpower and machinery that would be required, the plant and the living quarters they would need to build and the logistics of recruiting and briefing and feeding the army of arboreal workers needed to transform a dream into something living and real.

It was ambitious and exciting. And it was lucrative. The previous evening Abercrombie had told him he wanted everything accomplished over a ten-week time frame. Three months at the outside, he said, joking that the extra fortnight was only available if they had to factor in some major catastrophe. Curtis' fee for this was £250,000. If he delivered on the nail he qualified for a bonus. It was considerably more money than he had managed to earn over the past five years of his working life.

His criss-cross route across the site brought him at one point in his progress close to Gibb's Mourning. He stopped and from the saddle of the bike saw that the great thorn bush possessed in daylight almost the same menace it had in darkness. It was squat and baleful and ugly. Its branches were almost implausibly thick and fibrous and there was something anthropomorphic about them in the sunshine. They seemed like strong and sinewy limbs twisted and contorted with the promise of the pain they could inflict.

He looked at the thorns. He noticed with a shudder that in daylight several of them had the corpses of birds impaled on them. They must have flown into the horny talons of that revolting growth over the course of the night. Their feathers fluttered as they lay skewered there, sparrows and thrushes and finches hung like bloodied trophies.

For some reason he remembered then Freemantle's joke of two mornings earlier about being up with the larks. A lot had changed since that phone conversation, but one thing hadn't: he still wouldn't know what a lark looked like. Maybe there was an example present in the gory tableau in front of him.

But he didn't really feel like further studying the bush.

~~He decided he would visit Loxley's Cross. He calculated that it lay about four miles to the north east of where he stood. He had seen Raven Dip and he had visited Gibbet Mourning and he wondered whether the third ancient location mapped on this wilderness would have the same sinister character of the other two. It didn't matter, really. In a few weeks these places would be obliterated forever and the forest returned to claim its place and restore the character of the land to how it had originally been.~~

There was a signpost when he got there. It was so stark and solitary an object in the surrounding grassy expanse that it possessed the character, to him, of some sort of man-made anomaly. It was made of cast iron and looked as though it dated from the early nineteenth century. It was painted black and its surface was pitted by time and weather. The places it pointed to were picked out on vanes placed at right angles to one another.

The first of the vanes pointed him back towards Gibbet Mourning. The second pointed coastwards towards some forgotten destination that had once been named Puller's Reach. Who or what a puller was, Curtis had no idea. He was a bit mystified by Loxley's Cross. It was enigmatic and so solitary and redundant it seemed almost surreal. It pointed to nowhere anyone might ever wish to go. But it was not sinister, which was something.

Looking at it, still and black and staunch, he wondered whether the function of the signpost at Loxley's Cross might actually be the opposite of what would generally be assumed. It might exist to warn the wary traveller against places they should not visit. He smiled to himself at that contrapuntal bit of reasoning. Then he looked at his watch. He was due back at the house for lunch at one o'clock. He had ample time. He would head for Puller's Reach and check personally on whatever it was the sign was warning people to avoid.

He was almost at the edge of the sea and had practically given up, was on the very brink of the land when before he saw what he supposed must be the Reach. It was a construction. It was modest, but it was unarguably man-made.

Only a small cairn of stones marked the spot, at a place indistinguishable otherwise from anywhere else on the cliff top. It was very still, the sea was calm and it was almost noon when he got there. He dismounted and switched off the quad bike's engine, listening to the somnolent rhythm of the waves lapping eighty feet below on the beach as he studied the conical pile.

The cairn had been assembled from large pebbles. This careful work had been completed a long time ago. The quantity and age of the moss and lichen suggested decades. The stones were stained a deep, enduring green with what had grown over them in their enduring stillness there through the years. The whole construction was about a yard across at its base and reached to a flat pinnacle only a little higher than his waist.

The wind had got up, unless it was just that bit fresher anyway in the exposure of the cliff top, so close to the expanse of the open sea. It whistled through the cairn. Curtis listened. The sound crooned and insinuated, like some sly and secretive melody half reluctant to let you hear it. It was as though some spirit inhabited the stones and he was hearing it at play, making music partly to entertain itself and partly to signal the fact of its presence, invisible there.

Curtis tried to enjoy the boundless view out over the sea as the waste of water glittered and toiled. He searched the horizon for ships, but there were none. Ordinarily a view such as this one would have lifted him, the way endless vistas were apt to do to anyone, freeing them from the bondage of their daily concerns with the sight of something naturally exhilarating, timeless and in the truest sense free. He inhaled the pure air.

But his mood did not lift. The whistle through the cairn had grown harsh and insistent. There was

something restless and febrile about the sound. It scratched and mauled at the senses. And the air did not seem pure. It smelled sourly tainted, as though something had spoiled on the spot. He thought that it might be the moss on the stones. Then it occurred to him that some small mammal might have sickened and sheltered at the cairn's stone heart and perished there. He could smell its decomposition.

He decided he would attempt to descend the cliff to the beach. He would try to discover a route that could take him down without risk of falling and breaking his neck. The cliffs were not sheer. There were routes. They were goat-narrow but he was young and agile and he felt a compulsion to breathe clean air at the edge of the water. He wanted the smart of salt in his nostrils, suddenly, the prick of sea spray on the skin of his face.

Ten minutes later he was at the tide line. The smell of brine was strong and invigorating and the tumble of waves hissing into shingle an innocent sound that brought back, as it always did, a rush of tumbling childhood memories – each of them warm and innocent. He felt the strengthening sun on his face and was reminded that soon it would be April and the earth would surrender its spring life to tremulous buds reaching for light above the soil.

Then his eyes alighted on something else man-made. He saw a pattern imposed on the beach and not randomly, by nature. It was two parallel rows of pilings, the wood ancient and petrified, the planks of the landing stage they must once have secured at the spot long rotted away. He remembered the name on the sign he had seen pointing in this direction and thought that boats would be hauled ashore and that Puller's Reach was a more logical name for a landing stage on a shore than it was for a pile of whispering stones on a cliff top.

He was studying the pilings, engrossed in his study of them, when he experienced the sudden and unmistakable sensation of being watched. It wasn't subtle this time, like it had been the previous evening at Gibbet Mourning with Sam Freemantle. It was almost overwhelming, so much so that he had no alternative but to turn around and look at the direction his senses strongly insisted that an unwelcome scrutiny was coming from.

There was a figure above him at the cliff edge. It was a quite tall and slender man. He was attired in a belted tunic and leggings. He was not clad in armour as he was having slain his monster in the stained-glass depiction at Raven Dip. He was older and his hair was shorter and he wasn't armed. He was looking directly at Curtis with an expression that was impossible to read and Curtis had the giddy thought that if he lived to see the age of forty, this was what he would look like. The clothes would be different. Physically, the likeness would be exact.

He was looking at a ghost. Reason told him that. Reason dictated that conclusion to him and so did the gooseflesh crawling over his skin and the tingle of terror invading his scalp. The warmth of the sun was forgotten. His childhood memories were suddenly at a bleak remove. He stood stranded in a stark winter of fear and incomprehension for a moment and then the courage and nerve returned to him and he thought, *I'm being toyed with here. I'm the victim of an elaborate joke. There are no ghosts. It's broad daylight and that's a costumed actor up there.*

He ran for the path he had descended. He climbed, agile and furious, his heart hammering with effort and indignation until he reached the top.

There was no one there. The stones of the cairn were silent. All he could hear was his own heavy breathing and his own thumping heart until he heard the sound of an engine and saw a quad bike at the horizon to his left coming towards him. The rider was tall and long-limbed and riding out of the saddle, like someone galloping astride a racehorse might. The rider was too young to be Abercrombie, far too slight to be Freemantle. The bike was still half a mile away when Curtis realized its rider was Francesca.

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