

The Miraculous Rebirth of Edgar Bartholomew Roberts
by Michael Grant

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Prologue

Everybody has some days that are more important than others. Days where they find themselves forgetting about the ordinary routine of life to concentrate on some significant event. Sometimes the repercussions from these events are only temporary, and are gone as the day ends, like a leaf tossed away on a casual breeze. Other events can echo for a much longer time, from several weeks, to months, to a lifetime even, and their consequences may never truly be said to fade away. These are the events that shape our futures and form us into the people we eventually become. They are the turning points, the milestones by which we mark the beginning of a new chapter, and when they arrive, all the events preceding those points are firmly confined to the past, from whence they may never again resurface except as pale, faded memories. Those are the times that we live for.

Having said that, and despite the fact that most lives contain many of these major episodes, there are relatively few people who can point to a precise date and truthfully say ‘That is when my life changed forever. After that day, nothing was the same again.’ I, however, am able to identify that date in my life with no difficulty, for it was on that day that everything – and I mean absolutely *everything* – was permanently altered, and my entire slate was wiped clean.

The date was Thursday 17th September 2009.

That was the day I died.

Chapter 1

But before I elaborate upon that tale, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Edgar Bartholomew Roberts. Or rather, it *was* – but we'll get to that in due course. I've always hated my parents for that name. I've hated my parents for a lot of things. What a pompous, pretentious thing to call a child. They must surely have been overcompensating for the myriad inadequacies in their own lives when they chose that name. They probably thought that by giving me such an upper-class name they would somehow be able to elevate themselves above the peasant-like dirge that was their existence. If that was the plan, it failed badly.

Because my parents weren't able to support me. They couldn't afford to fulfil even my most basic of needs, or to give me the lifestyle that is enjoyed by so many children and invariably taken for granted, a lifestyle that I have been searching for unsuccessfully ever since. They simply couldn't afford me.

You might argue that this is no sin, that they weren't poor from choice but merely from the cards that had fallen to them in this infinite poker game in which we live. Alright, that's fair enough. They couldn't help being poor. But they should have thought about that before having a baby, shouldn't they? A baby that was clearly neither needed nor particularly wanted.

They abandoned me one autumn evening, wrapped in a blanket and just dumped on the steps of an orphanage, as though I were a bag of rubbish to be picked up by refuse collectors. Discarded without a second thought. The only other thing they left with me was a note giving my name (that ghastly, sickening name) and my date of birth. I was five months old.

Five months old.

That is a pain that will never leave me.

But that's enough about my parents. I've already given them more attention than they deserve. Let's move on.

That orphanage was where I spent my childhood, along with all the other unwanted children. Overall, I must confess that it was an agreeable place in which to grow up. It was always warm and comfortable, furnished with large padded armchairs that we were

allowed to sit in (but not climb on!) and containing all the facilities we could need, although they weren't always in the best working order. I remember the upstairs taps often used to seize up in winter, forcing us to brush our teeth and wash in the kitchen sink. And the electrical sockets were never brilliant, as a number of them used to visibly spark when you pushed a plug in. But these are all minor complaints, and in fact they did seem to give the house a tangible sense of character and make it feel marginally more like a home than a mere building.

They used to feed us three times a day – breakfast, lunch and dinner, with a glass of milk before bed if we were good. This was a perfectly satisfactory arrangement, but it really was a case of eating the set meals at the set times or going hungry, and so I would often find myself (on the days when I had eaten little dinner, with the excuse that I had no real appetite at the time, when in fact it was because I didn't much like the food being served) sneaking down in the middle of the night when I was certain everyone was in bed to steal bread from the pantry. I used to do it in such a way as to make it look as though the bread had been nibbled by mice so as not to raise too much suspicion, and consequently I suppose I directly influenced the decision of the orphanage staff to get a pet cat. Funnily enough, having a cat did little to hinder the 'mice' in the pantry, but fortunately most people put this down to the fact that he seemed to have a much greater preference for sleeping than for hunting.

My education was adequate but unremarkable. I worked my way through the state education system, getting rewarded for doing what I was told and punished for stepping out of line, all the while continuing to develop my understanding of the ways of the world. Academically I was always fairly average, never the real bright spark yet equally never the dunce or class clown. I wasn't clever enough or stupid enough to get special attention, which placed me in precisely the bracket where I was more or less ignored. I longed for appreciation and a way to stand out from the crowd, but none presented itself and therefore I was forced to be content with treading the mediocre middle-ground.

In the same way I was never really popular nor particularly unpopular. I wasn't – still am not – one of those people who can make friends instantly, but I took my time and gradually built up a small

select group of companions who were to accompany me through my school days and, in some cases, beyond.

Of course I experienced some degree of teasing, mainly oriented around my orphan background and also around my absurd name (thanks again, parents). Like most people, I just put up with it, ignored it and got on with life. To be honest, I don't blame those who teased me. I was the perfect target and if I were them I'd probably have done likewise.

School, then, was for me a generally unexceptional experience. Having said that, though, there was one thing that I did really enjoy, and that I found myself looking forward to eagerly every week. That thing was drama lessons.

Soon after I began studying drama I realised it was something that appealed to me. I found it provided an escape from the otherwise bland routine of my life, an opportunity to immerse myself in someone else's story and to morph into a different person with different problems to my own. There was a great certainty about acting, because everything had been planned and worked out beforehand. I knew how the story would unfold and how it would end, giving me feelings of control and power that I never experienced anywhere else.

And what's more, it brought me the respect and appreciation that I so craved. People would come to watch me perform, and when they applauded at the end they were applauding *me*. I was no longer this poor average soul, but someone with purpose. I became significant at last, a meaningful person.

I would frequently walk back to the orphanage at the end of the day playing the part of a different character, and then continue to impersonate that character for the remainder of the evening. This confused the rest of the children and irritated the staff, but it always brought me immense joy. One week I would be an inner-city businessman, the next a tramp off the street and the next a circus entertainer. Once I even attempted playing the part of an actor, but that quickly got too convoluted and was therefore short-lived. At school I made sure I got a part in every production I possibly could, and I gradually rose through the ranks until in my final year I had already played an appreciable number of major roles. By this time I knew that

acting was what I loved, my passion. It was what I wanted to do with my life.

By the time I reached the age of eighteen I had gained A-levels in drama, English literature and art, and the next logical step for me was to get into a theatre school. I was lucky enough to secure myself a place at one of the best of such schools in the country, and whilst there I felt a genuine sense of belonging. I had the privilege of being able to indulge my love of acting as often and as enthusiastically as I wanted without the distractions that came with having to study multiple subjects. It was certainly a step up, though. Whereas previously I had been one of the best at drama in my school, I was now thrust into an environment that contained all of the country's top young theatrical talent, distilled and concentrated into one place. As a result of this, I found that I really had to fight to make my voice heard. Nevertheless, I was more than up for the challenge. I worked hard for those three years and in the end emerged with a degree in professional acting.

As I discovered soon after graduating, finding a job in theatre isn't the easiest of tasks. In fact, it took me the best part of a year after finishing at stage school, during which time I worked on the tills at a local supermarket in order to pay the bills, for me to eventually be accepted into a small repertory company in London. My job as part of the New Armstrong Theatre Company was ideally suited to me, and provided an excellent springboard for the rest of my career. Over the next four years I starred in a number of moderately successful plays with some rather reputable companies. I could quite happily have continued like that indefinitely.

I won't pretend that I made a lot of money from my job, but I had a modest income that was sufficient to cover my needs. You must remember that I had never been accustomed to 'living the high life', so I was quite content with a straightforward existence in my small rented flat.

It was a lifestyle that I enjoyed. I gradually built up a reputation for my acting skills, and with it the parts I was called on to play became increasingly more interesting and exciting.

So that was my life for four years. Not bad, I'm sure you'll agree. I don't doubt that there are many people who would be exceedingly

jealous of such a situation, and I therefore count myself very lucky to have been able to benefit from it.

But nothing lasts forever, and little did I realise then how much things were going to change in an alarmingly short period of time.

Chapter 2

Although I was happy with my situation at that stage, I have always been a somewhat restless soul and therefore was always on the lookout for new opportunities. It's understandable, I'm sure you'll agree. After all, I was young and the world was laid out before me, a giant buffet with a plethora of dishes still to be tried. One thing which I had for a long while fancied having a go at was acting in a film, and I kept a close eye on the pages of the actors' magazines to see if anything would come up that I was interested in auditioning for. I wasn't on the lookout for anything fancy, just a little film that I could take part in to see what it was like, to 'test the water' as it were. Preferably fairly local, to save me having to travel too far. I wasn't even looking for a main role, really – just a small part in a small film, and I would be able to see where it took me.

One day, after many months of scanning through such magazines, I came across an advert that did in fact catch my eye. It had been posted by a small independent production company that were looking for actors to be in their new film, a fantasy picture with the working title of 'Soulcaster'. I was half-way through my contract with a theatre company at the time, and I was looking for something that I could do once that finished. This looked ideal – a bit different, at any rate. From the advert it was clear that they were a low-budget outfit so probably weren't looking for big stars. In short, it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

I sent off my C.V. that week, but deliberately thought little of it after that. I didn't dare to raise my expectations or try and predict the outcome. There was no point, I told myself. Rather, I carried on as I was before and made myself forget about the whole thing until I knew where things stood.

It was a pleasant surprise to me, therefore, when the following month I received a letter from the company that I had applied to, inviting me to audition for a role in their film. This was exciting news, and it left me with that peculiar combination of delight and apprehension that always comes with moving one step closer to a goal. Delight at having cleared the first hurdle; apprehension of the greater hurdles to come.

The audition was to be held in two weeks. Two weeks. That was a scary thought. All of a sudden I realised that I desperately wanted to succeed in this venture. Until that point it had been a case of 'if I get it, I get it. If not, then never mind.' But now that I was actually on the road towards my goal, the final reward somehow seemed tantalisingly close. Yet still there was the greatest challenge to overcome. So near, yet so far... Those words had never had more truth in them. What a disconcertingly unstable position it was to be in.

As before, I made a great effort to forget all of this and to adopt my 'whatever will be, will be' attitude. But it did become increasingly more difficult for me to settle into that mindset, and despite my best efforts I found myself becoming more and more restless in the weeks leading up to the audition.

Eventually the day itself came, and I got up early in order to walk through town to the office-like building in which the auditions were to be held. It was a fair distance on foot, and took me most of an hour at the brisk pace at which I walk, but this was good because it allowed me to walk off some of the pent-up adrenalin that had been accumulating in recent weeks.

I arrived at the place at around twenty-past nine in the morning – once again I had underestimated my walking speed and the time it would take me to arrive. Still, best to be early.

The building itself was a dreary example of sixties architecture. It was essentially a grey brick box, three storeys high, with three large windows on each floor looking down onto the street below. The ground-floor windows were shaded with Venetian blinds, behind which I guessed were situated the administration offices and reception. I tried to imagine what could be housed on the other two floors, but my knowledge of the film industry was decidedly sketchy at the time and so I couldn't come to any definite conclusion. Overall the place was externally exceedingly bland, and had it not been for the brightly-coloured plastic plaque displaying the company logo beside the front door, it would have been very difficult to distinguish the place from all the other plain-looking buildings that lined the street.

Having surveyed it briefly, I made my move and walked up to the front door, an impressive wooden creation with six glass panes and

a (heavily tarnished) brass knocker. Upon pushing it tentatively I discovered that it was open, and it let off a loud creak when it was moved, no doubt alerting the whole building to my presence.

No need for a burglar alarm here, I thought. Oil for the door hinges clearly wasn't one of their top spending priorities.

Inside was a basic hallway/reception area, with a couple of nondescript watercolours on the walls and a threadbare rug on the floor. There was also a small wooden desk, labelled 'Reception' by a laminated sign blu-tacked to its front, behind which was sitting a middle-aged woman who wore small spectacles at the end of her thin nose and who looked over them at me as I entered. She smiled at me in a way that managed to be both friendly and unnerving at the same time.

"Er, hello, I'm here for the auditions," I stammered.

"I know," she replied, which caught me completely off-guard. Before I could inquire as to what she meant, she looked down at a file on her desk and said, "You must be Mr. Roberts." She looked up at me again over her glasses, and pointed to a door on the left of the hallway. "If you'd like to warm up in there. I'll bring you your script extract at about quarter to, and then I will come and get you when they're ready. Before you go, would you please sign in here."

I did as I was told, noting down my name and the time in the large lined book she pushed towards me, before proceeding through into the room, eager to escape the receptionist's all-seeing stare, and closing the door behind me.

Strange woman.

I still had just over half an hour left until my audition, which left me with more than enough time to warm up and look at the script when it arrived. I therefore spent some of that time stretching, some pacing up and down, some doing deep-breathing exercises, some listening to the footsteps from the floor above, some questioning my true purpose in life, some wondering why the radiator wasn't on at this time of year, and some absent-mindedly examining the unusual style of skirting board they had. By the time all of this was accomplished it was quarter to ten, and the receptionist brought in the

script extract for me to look at. I then set about a more thorough warm-up to prepare myself and get used to the unfamiliar text in front of me.

At exactly ten o'clock the door opened again, and the creepy receptionist lady entered.

"Follow me."

I followed her.

She led me up a flight of stairs to the first floor, which was not ideal because it left me slightly out of breath when I reached the top and it was therefore not going to do my nerves any favours when I had to enter the audition room. I'd just have to put up with it. She opened one of the doors and addressed the unseen people behind it:

"Mr. Edgar Roberts."

She stood to the side to let me past. I entered, and heard her close the door behind me.

I was in what appeared to be a meeting room of some sort. There was a whiteboard on the far wall, and presumably the desks, which were currently stacked at the sides, would usually be gathered in the centre. There were two tables end-to-end at the other end of the room, behind which were sitting in a row the three individuals who were to dictate my future. The only other person in the room was standing to the side behind a small video camera which was mounted on a tripod.

"Good morning." It was the first person on the left of the table who had spoken. He was a young man; probably not as young as me though – early 30s, perhaps? He had short black hair and sported 'designer stubble', and he was wearing a navy blue fleece, presumably in an attempt to keep warm in this poorly-heated building. He grinned at me. "I see you made it past Mrs. Cunningham? She's a strange old thing, but she gets the job done."

I smiled at the comment. Apparently he was referring to the receptionist. It was probably a standard line that he used to make all the auditionees feel more relaxed, but nevertheless it did work, to an extent.

"Yes, I did," I replied timidly, not wishing to return any banter for fear of it being ill-received.

"I'll introduce us," the man continued. "My name's Peter Davis, I'm going to be directing Soulcaster. This is Jonathan Sheaffer, our producer."

Clearly of a similar age to Davis – the two had most likely been friends before getting involved in this production together – Sheaffer was a tall, heavily-built man, an image that was strangely at odds with his tiny gold-rimmed spectacles. He was sitting on Davis' left.

"Sitting over there is Sarah Lorayne, our casting director. She will be responding to your lines today."

An older woman, with close-cropped brown hair and tired-looking eyes. She smiled at me warmly, an expression which I returned.

"And finally, Tom Farnby in the corner there will be video recording your audition."

Another young man, not long out of school by the looks of him, Tom gave me a sheepish smile and a nod.

"Right, well, if you're ready then we might as well get on with things. Do you want another minute to warm up?"

"Er, no, I'm O.K. thanks," I heard myself say. In truth I would have liked a bit more of a warm-up now that I was here, but the last thing I wanted to do was inconvenience them by wasting their time.

"O.K. then. In that case, Sarah, would you like to begin?"

The audition proceeded remarkably quickly from there. I was so focussed on the moment and on giving the best performance I could of the unfamiliar lines, that I lost track of time and it was with some considerable surprise that I realised, several minutes later, that we had finished reading through the selected script extracts. The panel all thanked me for coming along, and Davis promised that they would be in touch (for better or for worse!) within the next week or so. I bid them goodbye with another humble smile, and watched myself walk out of the door and back down the stairs. I then signed out with Mrs. Cunningham and left the building.

On the way home I had all sorts of unusual thoughts. Had that all really just happened? Was it perhaps just a dream? A hallucination? A false memory? It certainly didn't seem real any more. And what had I done? What had I said? I could barely remember anything that had

occurred in that building. I hoped I hadn't made a fool of myself. No, I didn't think I had. At any rate, I'd find out soon enough. The important thing was, I was pretty sure that I had done myself justice overall. If my audition wasn't perfect, that was only fair because I wasn't perfect. They had seen what they would get – it was up to them now to take it or leave it.

The following Saturday, I finally received the dreaded letter. It came in a plain white envelope, the address printed onto a sticker on the front. Up until then I had succeeded in once again pushing the matter to the back of my mind, but now that I held the future in my hand, I couldn't keep my apprehension down any longer. My heart was pumping hard against my ribcage, my breath came in short puffs. I thought to myself how silly I was being. After all, it was just a letter. But I couldn't help myself getting anxious. I fumbled with the envelope, trying to open it, which took longer than normal because my hands were shaking. Finally I managed to tear it open, and remove and unfold the letter inside. I took a deep breath and began to read...

'Dear Mr. Edgar Roberts,

Thank you very much for auditioning for a part in our upcoming film, Soulcaster. We truly appreciate your effort and enthusiasm, and are grateful that you took the time out from your no doubt busy schedule to audition.'

Yeah yeah, get on with it...

'As you will appreciate, competition for parts has been extremely high, and we have been forced to make many difficult decisions and decline a great number of exceptional actors and actresses.'

Oh, right. Here we go. The polite 'Thanks, but no thanks.' Just what I didn't need.

‘For this reason we wish to give you especially warm congratulations as we would like to offer you a part in Soulcaster.’

What?

Did I interpret that correctly?

I re-read that last sentence twice just to be certain. Yes, it meant what I thought it did. I was in. I had a part in the film.

I dropped the letter onto my coffee table wearily, before slumping – indeed, almost collapsing – into my settee. For several minutes I was in no fit state to celebrate. I felt exhausted, the massive release of tension that I had just experienced sapping all my strength away. I stared at a blank spot on the wall for seconds, minutes, hours... I don’t know how long. Not moving, not making a sound, not even thinking. I was utterly dazed.

Gradually I began to come to my senses. I sat up slowly, breathed in deeply and stretched. I then picked up the letter again from the table and finished reading it. It seemed that not only was I to have a part in the film, but I was to have the starring role. I would be playing the hero of the film, Dirk Matchwood, a real cowboy-type character. The rest of the letter detailed all the ‘dates for the diary’, which I immediately wrote in because I knew I would forget if I didn’t do so now. There were contracts to sign, scripts to read, costumes to be fitted, prosthetics to be manufactured. I was going to be kept very busy. And I couldn’t wait to get started.

At this point it fully dawned on me what had happened. I had made it. I had conquered the obstacles in my path and was now promised my reward. It was a good feeling. It was then that I let the smile, which had arrived on my mouth several minutes ago, spread, and keep spreading until it was a grin that was surely unsurpassed in all humanity. And I continued to grin as I telephoned my friends to catch up with them and inform them of the great news.

That day was 10th November 2001, and it was one day that changed the course of my life entirely. I didn’t realise at the time how crucial that day would be for me – I couldn’t have known. And if I had, I may not have celebrated quite as enthusiastically. But all that was still

to come. For the time being I was happy. I took the well-earned opportunity to celebrate my success and look forward to a bright future.

Chapter 3

Six years later, and everything had changed. Everything had changed quite dramatically.

In 2007 was released the final film in the critically-acclaimed epic Soulcaster movie trilogy. It followed the success of its two predecessors – built on it, in fact – ultimately making over five hundred million dollars in the domestic box office and earning a place as the second highest-grossing film ever made. Fans spent hours, and in some cases days, queuing to get a seat in the cinemas for opening night. The media coverage was overwhelming, with interviews, reports, articles and documentaries being shown on all major television channels and printed in all major newspapers. There was merchandise sold of every description (and I mean *every* description!). Even the novelisation made it onto the New York Times bestseller list. It was one of the greatest cinematic phenomena in the history of the world.

No-one, least of all I, could have predicted the enormous success that was to be enjoyed by Soulcaster, and the two sequels it spawned, when we started out filming in mid-2002. It was, as I have explained, a small film, with a low budget, a minimal production company and a host of unknown actors (including myself). None of us who were working on it really expected much. We certainly didn't expect to kick-start a new global film franchise.

Admittedly, though, despite its apparently small scale, the original film did have big ideas. I won't go into the details – after all, you've probably seen it by now – but suffice it to say that it's a classic tale of good versus evil, albeit one that is wrapped up in lots of fantastic trappings. I think that may be the thing that really captured the world's hearts and minds. It's what we all long for – the triumph of good over evil. I don't think we will ever truly tire of that essential premise, hence Soulcaster's enduring popularity. It really was a wonderful project to be part of.

So I couldn't refuse when, in the latter half of 2003, I was asked to reprise my role in two sequels. I knew that this was my chance to make a mark on the world and that it was an opportunity the likes of which only comes along once in a lifetime. I signed the contract as soon as I

could, excited about my new-found fame and about the starry future that lay ahead of me.

I spent a large part of 2004 filming *Loneweaver*, the first sequel. Needless to say, this film was bigger in every way: bigger budget, bigger crew, bigger sets, more advertising, more advanced special effects. The danger, as with any follow-up to a successful film, was that this new one would not compare favourably, and that it would end up as a disappointment to the huge audience that was waiting with bated breath for its arrival. When the bar had been set so fantastically high by the original, it was difficult to see how we would ever be able to equal that sort of public reaction.

Nevertheless, we managed to overcome those obstacles and create a movie that not only matched the box office triumph of its predecessor but surpassed it. By this time it was becoming near-impossible to escape from the phenomenon. Everywhere you looked there was something connected with the film, from posters to merchandise to items of clothing even. Just how much bigger could it possibly get?

That question was finally answered in 2007 with the release of *Risemaker* amid an absolute media frenzy. The rest, as they say, is history. But although the film trilogy was complete, it would continue to live on in the gigantic fanbase that had built up around it. It would be maintained for years to come through fan websites, magazines, conventions and a whole host of other creations and activities. These films had done something that I had never thought possible, in that they had in effect jumped out of the screen and started affecting people's real lives, through the huge community of fans that had come together. It was immensely satisfying for me to know that I had played a small part in the creation of this community, and in doing so had helped to bring the world that little bit closer together.

And what became of me? What happened to the lonely orphan boy who had for so long wallowed in mediocrity?

Quite a lot, in fact.

Firstly, I very rapidly and very easily became what can only be described as a comfortably rich man. My share of the profits from the films didn't look like much when written down as a percentage, but

when multiplied by the humongous box office takings it became something of a small fortune. To be honest, I never really knew what to do with all this new-found wealth. It was an alien feeling to me, to have so much more money than I actually needed. I was never quite able to come to terms with it.

For a while I did my best to enjoy these riches. I bought a new house, detached, in Kensington. A decided upgrade from my past residences. I bought lavish clothes – a tailored suit, silk shirts, designer jumpers – although in truth they never looked or felt to me all that much different from the budget clothes I had been buying for years, except that I had to be considerably more careful not to spill anything on them. I bought a big T.V., a high-end sound system, a smartphone... The list goes on. But it's true what they say about money being incapable of buying happiness. Even though I was now living in comparative luxury, there were still things missing that no quantity of twenty-pound notes could help me to attain.

I tried giving to charity, particularly those for orphaned and homeless children, for I knew that these organizations would be able to put my money to much more worthwhile use than I ever could. But even this seemed dry, shallow even. It felt as though I were merely a human piggybank, handing out cash to those who needed it but serving no useful purpose myself. Overall, I was a bit overwhelmed by the riches I had gained.

If the money I acquired from starring in those films was considerable, though, the fame that was thrown upon me was unfathomable. I admit that it's not surprising. My face was everywhere, from magazines to posters to promotional drinks cans, not to mention cinema screens! I did so many interviews leading up to and following the release of each picture that surely nobody in the world could escape from seeing or hearing or reading me somewhere. In truth I often felt a bit guilty, and quite profoundly embarrassed, for forcing myself into people's consciousness like that. But it wasn't my idea, to be fair. I was just doing what the company instructed me to do. And it *was* rather fun all in all, to be asked so many questions and made to feel like your opinion was especially valid.

What wasn't fun, however, was the public reaction to my fame. Suddenly the whole world knew who I was. Everywhere I went, people would at the very least point and whisper conspiratorially, or at the other end of the scale would rush up and breathlessly ask for a photo of me hugging them. I signed such a massive number of autographs that very quickly I gave up trying to think of a unique message to write on every one and resorted to the classic 'Best wishes' followed by a signature. I had never thought before about how much I valued my anonymity, but now that it was gone I missed it more than anything. I would have given up my entire fortune to have it back again and to be recognised as the average thirty-three-year-old that I was, instead of as a superior lifeform that was somehow greater than all of the other mere mortals beneath me.

The press seemed almost as eager to bring me back down to earth as I was. I was constantly stalked by journalists who would photograph me indulging in any activity that they judged to be beneath me in my new role as a higher being. I went to Burger King one day. Why? Not because I'm a slob. Not because I was short of money. Not because I was trying to be 'normal'. I just wanted a burger. Is that such a crime? Because it was treated as such in the following day's newspapers. This was the life I now led. I had sold my soul to the public for some miserable money that I didn't even know what to do with.

One more thing. You would think that having had a main role in a major series of motion pictures would put me in good stead for when I later needed to find new roles. You would think that all the theatrical companies would be clamouring to get hold of me and give me a part in their productions. You would think that life would suddenly become very easy. At least, that's what I thought. How wrong I was.

Much to my astonishment, after finishing work on the Soulcaster trilogy, employment became increasingly difficult for me to find. It seemed that companies found it hard to take me seriously as an actor any more. They couldn't see that a big-budget film star could transfer his talents to the stage, to the classical theatre that they regarded as a higher, more serious art form. More than ever before I would return home to find letters of rejection from companies who were wary of

casting a famous movie star and who instead opted for a less well-known but (so they believed) better-trained actor. It was not only demoralising but embarrassing for me to discover that I was no longer deemed a proper, high-class actor, but rather some gimmick of the movie industry who wouldn't be able to live up to the high standards of the stage. It was almost as if I had peaked already, and the only way to go was down.

All-in-all, then, was my life post-Soulcaster a happy one? To be honest, no. Those films had taken away my privacy, my friends and even my career prospects. And all that they had given me was things that I had never wanted in the first place and that I hadn't a clue what to do with now that I did have them. My life after the Soulcaster films was merely a shadow of the life that had preceded it. I was unhappy, lonely and bored. And all because one day I had decided to try something a bit different.

My head told me that it was only temporary. Surely this would all blow over soon enough, people would forget about me and the films, and I would be able to gradually settle back into the lifestyle that I had previously enjoyed. At times, this thought was the only thing that got me out of bed in the morning, the only spot of colour in the bleak landscape of my existence. But with time, even that began to fade. The truth slowly dawned on me over a period of many months. Soulcaster was a worldwide phenomenon. People would be watching these films for generations to come, and every time they did they would see my face and my name. Every time someone watched one of those films they would feed the monstrosity that was my fame, perpetuating it and all the horrible beasts that lived off it. The simple fact was, my fame would never go away – certainly not in my lifetime. This was how it was going to be from now on.

That was a very dark time for me. I began to think about death quite regularly. Sometimes it seemed like the only escape. And what difference would it really make to the rest of the world? Practically none, to be frank. Of course, it would be all over the news, and the whole country would say a collective "Oh dear, that's terrible isn't it?" before having another sip of tea and turning to the sports column. The fans would be briefly upset, but nobody would really care. In a couple

of weeks it would be forgotten and everyone would continue to go about their usual dull business. My legacy would live on in the Soulcaster films, but seeing as those were the only things people seemed to value me for, they probably wouldn't bother if the rest of me didn't.

No family, no real friends to speak of... No-one to properly mourn me when I was gone.

These thoughts seem awfully morbid, looking back. Indeed, that's because they were. But I was never suicidal, I hasten to say. Suicide has always appeared to me the coward's way out, the easy solution that leaves everyone else with the inconvenience of picking up the pieces. I don't know if there is an afterlife, but I want to put off finding out until the (quite literal) last minute.

Still, it was an attractive idea.

Escape.

Death.

The two words went hand-in-hand. They became synonymous to me.

Escape. Death.

Escape-death.

Escapedeath.

Over the coming months, ideas began to form in my mind, like mighty trees from tiny seeds, or crystals that seem to grow out of nothing. Abstract silhouettes of half-thoughts swirled continuously across my consciousness.

Escapedeath.

Hmm.

Possible?

Perhaps.

The longer I left them, the more solid these ideas became. They started to evolve into tangible concepts which expanded every day as I continued to consider them. With time, these concepts fell into an order, a sequence. They linked together to form larger, more complete schemes, all the while increasing in clarity. Eventually they combined into a whole, perfectly focussed and intricately-constructed entity.

That entity can only be described as a plan.

And overarching that entire plan was one strong notion that held it all together.

Escapedeath.

If Edgar Bartholomew Roberts wanted to escape from his life, all he had to do was die.

The date was Sunday 11th January 2009.

Chapter 4

"Hello?"

"Hello, David? It's me, Ed."

"Oh, hi Ed!" David sounded genuinely pleased to speak to me. "How are you? I haven't seen you in ages."

"I'm not too bad, actually. Not bad at all. How about you? Is Sarah getting on O.K. in her new job?"

Sarah is David's wife. At the time she'd just begun teaching at the local primary school.

"Oh, yeah, that's going great. She's really enjoying herself. Had loads of good feedback from her supervisors as well. Looks like she'll definitely be in it for the long run. Anyway, what have you been getting up to lately?"

"Not much really. You know, the usual stuff." I was eager to get to the point so I didn't elaborate any further. Instead I moved on to discussing the purpose of my phone call. I tried not to let the wobble in my voice betray my nerves as I spoke.

"But anyway, that's not why I'm phoning," I proceeded.

"Oh? It isn't?"

"No. I wanted to ask you, well, basically, are you busy this evening?"

"This evening? No, I don't think so. I don't have anything planned, if that's what you mean."

"Would you be able to come over here, to my house, for an hour or two?"

"Er, yes, I suppose so. For anything in particular?"

"I need to talk to you. About something really important."

David sounded understandably curious as he responded:

"Can't you just talk to me over the phone? It'd save me having to travel." He clearly then realised how impolite that last comment had sounded, for he quickly followed it up with, "Not that I don't want to see you or anything. It's not a problem for me to come over if that would be better."

From anyone else the apology would have sounded dishonest and shallow, but coming from David it was spoken with the utmost sincerity.

"No, I don't really want to talk about it over the phone. It's too complicated, and anyway you never know who might be listening in."

David chuckled. "What, do you think the F.B.I. are on your case or something?"

"Quite frankly it wouldn't surprise me. The rest of the world seems to be!" I said with a light smile.

The receiver fed another laugh into my ear.

"Ha ha! Yeah, I suppose so." A short pause before David continued. "Anyway, what sort of time were you thinking of?"

"Well I'm free all evening, so whatever's best for you. I was thinking around eight-ish? I've got Kettle Chips and Jaffa Cakes for us to scoff as well."

"Really? Why didn't you say so! I'll definitely be there!"

"Great. I'll see you at eight, then?"

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to hearing your mystery news. See you then."

"Bye."

"Bye."

I replaced the receiver in its cradle.

At this point it may be wise to digress from my narrative in order to properly introduce David to you. As I mentioned earlier, I have always made sure to choose my friends carefully rather than forming instant bonds with anyone and everyone that I meet. This led to me having a small but select group of what I believed to be really close friends, who I had thought I would always be able to rely on and would always stay by my side. Yet as my fame had grown in recent years, even they had begun to drift away from me. Phone calls had become less frequent, meetings less common, and I had soon had to come to terms with the fact that, despite my best efforts, most of them had become too distanced from me to really count as friends any more. Fame and celebrity had pulled us apart.

I say 'most of them' because this did not happen in every case. To be specific, there was one person who never deserted me and who stayed with me throughout the entire ordeal. His name is David Gardner. I have known him since we were at school together. We kept in touch throughout his days studying law at university and still met

up frequently now that he was married and holding down a job as a solicitor. Over the years he became my greatest friend and companion. He supported me all the way, and even though others decided they were no longer interested, he didn't once abandon me. For that, I will always be truly grateful.

David had said he looked forward to hearing my plan, but all of a sudden I realised I wasn't that eager to tell him anymore. What if he thought badly of it? What would I do then? What if he considered it a madcap, idiotic venture in which he would refuse to play a part?

There was a lot riding on this meeting with David. I needed him as an ally in my undertaking. There was no way I would ever be able to do it alone. And he had to agree to help me. If he didn't, then I'd just have to call the whole thing off before it had even started. I couldn't risk carrying on when I had divulged all of my ideas to someone else who wasn't to have a part in it. He would quite easily be able to blow my cover and ruin everything if he didn't approve of what I was doing. The whole fate of my plot rested on that evening.

I began to feel sharp pangs of self-doubt, which threatened to sabotage my carefully laid-out scheme. I had to admit to myself that, now I had taken the first step towards its execution, it did appear quite silly, childish even. Was I being stupid? It was so hard to tell. Maybe I shouldn't go through with it after all. I could tell David something different of importance and consign my plan to the rubbish heap. It was so tempting. It would avoid me the embarrassment of divulging my nonsensical designs to another, only to have them cast away as folly. Then I'd be able to carry on with life as normal.

But as soon as that last thought crossed my mind I knew it was impossible. 'Life as normal' for me had become a living nightmare. It couldn't carry on like this, it had to change. I knew that. It wasn't a question of whether I could get David on my side or not. It was a case of having to do it. This was my only chance, and failure was not an option.

All of this thinking left me very uptight and tense. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon - I still had five hours to kill before David arrived. I needed to find some way to amuse myself for that time. I began by pouring myself a shot of whisky to calm my nerves

and settling down to read the daily newspaper. I tried to put all thoughts of the evening ahead out of my mind.

At half-past seven I was once again on my toes, both figuratively and literally. Only half an hour to go. Not long enough for me to distract myself with something else, but long enough for my nerves to build up significantly. Part of me wished that he would come early, to get it over and done with; part of me wished he would never come at all so that I wouldn't have to face him. It was a most unpleasant feeling, this anticipation. I poured myself a gin and tonic to calm my nerves and took a seat in the living room. I tried to resist nibbling away all of the Kettle Chips before David arrived.

At eight o'clock precisely the doorbell rang. I leaped out of my seat and hopped out of the room and across the hallway to answer it.

David is a tall man, with spectacles and a moustache that lend him a real air of dignity. He is overall a warm, outgoing person, and he shook my hand heartily as I welcomed him over the threshold.

Twenty minutes later we were both sitting in my living-room, he in an armchair and I on the sofa. We both cradled glasses of bitter lemon in our hands – David was going to be driving back, and I didn't want to make him feel left out so had joined him in his choice of non-alcoholic beverage. The bowls of food were being gradually emptied.

Since he had arrived, we had engaged mainly in small talk, catching up on how each other's lives had progressed since our paths last crossed two months ago. But time was getting on, and I knew that my plan would provoke a lengthy discussion, so I made the decision to start explaining it there and then. I took a deep breath at an appropriate lull in conversation, then began to recite my pre-prepared lines.

"David," I started quietly, "when I asked you to come over I said that I had something very important to talk to you about."

"You did," he confirmed. He leaned forward in his seat, his eyes watching me quizzically.

"And I don't want to keep you here all day, so I'll get to the point." I gazed up to the ceiling and inhaled another lungful of air and dust. "You see, I'm not happy with my life."

David laughed. Not the reaction I had been hoping for.

"Ha! That's hardly a revelation, if you don't mind my saying so. I mean, who is nowadays?"

I carried on unperturbed. "No, but most people have something to look forward to or aim for, a light at the end of the tunnel. Some sort of consolation that gets them out of bed in the morning. I really don't feel I have anything like that. It's as though my life has hit a dead end."

David took a sip of his drink, thoughtfully considering how best to respond.

"Is this because of Soulcaster?" he finally asked.

I had often discussed with David the effects, both good and bad, that those films had had on my life. He knew that overall I was disappointed to say the least with how it had turned out.

"Yes!" I replied emphatically. "All this fame is destroying me! I feel trapped, like the whole world is watching. I'm like an exhibit, an animal in a zoo. They just want to poke me and laugh at me all the time! And the press, they stalk me relentlessly, photographing my every move for the world to see. Can you even imagine what that's like for me?"

"I confess that I'm lucky, Ed. I've never had to put up with that sort or scale of invasiveness. But you can get through it, you know. It won't last forever. One day it will all fade away and people will leave you alone again. You just need to stick it out until then. That's what you have to look forward to."

"But it won't, though, will it?" I snapped, looking him directly in the eyes. "I mean, it won't go away. As long as people watch these films (which they will surely do for many years to come) I will be famous. And as long as I'm famous, I'll have to put up with this... this half-life I'm living."

"You know, it needn't be a half-life," countered David after a brief silence. "Nobody's really trapping you, nobody's really stopping you from doing what you want. Sure, if they want to stare at you and make fun of you or whatever, that's fine. It's their problem. You can tolerate that, just ignore it. You can still do whatever you like with your life. Don't let all the idiots in the world get you down."

For a while after David had finished, I stared into the cloudy liquid I held, still fizzing away enthusiastically. He had said some powerful things there. Powerful things...

And perhaps he was right. I still had a life, and no amount of celebrity could take that away from me. Maybe I should just get on with things and put up with all the rest. Maybe I was being silly in letting it all get to me.

"No."

I spoke the single word out loud, but it was really more of a thought.

"No," I repeated with more confidence. "I appreciate what you're saying, David, and perhaps if circumstances were different I would agree with you. But it really isn't that simple. This is all too much for me; I genuinely can't cope. It has to change. It has to. I can't carry on like this."

"And what can we do about it? It's as you said, there's an inevitability about it all. We can't choose to end it – that's something we don't have control over. Only the public and the media can do that, and that will only happen once they have decided that they are no longer interested."

"Which, as we've discussed, may never happen. And even if it did, just think of all the time I would potentially waste waiting. I don't want to waste any more time. I want to live again."

David slumped back into his chair resignedly and looked at the carpet.

"I just don't see that anything can be done, that's all," he said quietly.

There was silence for a moment, during which time I became acutely aware of how loud the ticking, coming from the carriage clock on the mantelpiece, was. It was like a metronome, or a pulsating heartbeat.

"A minute ago," I said, "you told me that we don't have control over when it will end." He looked back up at me. "Well, that's not entirely true, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

I swallowed to try and lubricate my dry throat.

"What I mean is that there is an escape. It's not easy, though. In fact, it will probably be one of the greatest challenges I've ever faced."

Another short pause while I tried to think of the words.

"But... it's possible. It can be done. And if we could pull it off, well..." I sighed. "It would give me my life back. This is my one chance to escape."

Was now the time? Had I introduced it properly? Would he understand? And now that it came down to it, did I really want to go through with this? I knew the answer to the last of those questions, but the first three? Too difficult to judge. I would just have to try and see.

David was waiting for me to continue. He hadn't said anything, but his expression and his unwavering stare told me that he was waiting for the rest.

I couldn't put it off any longer.

Here it goes...

"David..." I hesitated before taking the plunge. "I want to fake my own death."

Neither of us moved for at least a whole minute after that. It was as though time itself had stopped. Then at last David broke the silence.

"I beg your pardon?"

It was no easier for me to say the second time round:

"I want... to fake my own death."

More of that dreaded silence. Silence, except for the ticking clock. I could have sworn it was ticking faster now than before.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No! Well, apart from the gin and tonic. And the whisky earlier... But that's not important. I'm serious about this."

I wanted to say more, to offer a passionate speech about why this was so important to me, but I couldn't. My mind had gone completely blank, except for the infuriating ticking of the clock.

"I must say," David continued, "that this wasn't what I was expecting. It's quite a, er, quite a surprise. Yes, quite a surprise indeed... On first thoughts, I think you've completely lost your mind. And yet... Well, I've known you for, what, the best part of twenty years? I know you're not the type of person to jump into something insane without thoroughly thinking it through beforehand. I can't say I

approve, but I am intrigued. I'll hear you out. I won't promise anything more. But I'll listen to what you have to say."

He shifted in his seat.

"For a start, how do you actually plan to do this?"

I felt like a child explaining some naïve strategy to his parents as I talked David through the method I had devised for faking my death. As I said to him, it was easy enough to make it look like suicide. No body, nothing to incriminate me or give away the fact that I was still alive. I'd be able to disappear off the face of the earth, off to a new life.

"A new life?" queried David. "What sort of new life did you have in mind? And do you really expect it to be all that much better than your current life?"

"Well it can hardly be worse, can it? I want to move somewhere small, where the community is close-knit and the pace of life is slow. Away from the city. And I don't want to be followed there by the paparazzi."

David still looked doubtful.

"But surely you'll be recognised?" he said. "You said yourself that your face is one of the most well-known in the world. You can't just run away and pretend to be somebody else without anyone noticing. It won't fool anybody. They'll all still know who you are!"

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. Because I will no longer be Edgar Roberts, will I? I'll change my name, live as someone else. I can get a fake I.D.-"

"Fake I.D.!! Are you crazy? Where do you plan to find one of those?"

"It's honestly not that difficult when you know where to look - I mean, how many kids get hold of them every year? It's all possible. I've done my research."

"Right."

I couldn't tell if the look he was now giving me was one of extreme thought or merely the utmost disapproval. I hoped for the former, and carried on with what felt like the most awkward sales pitch in the history of mankind.

"Changing my appearance would be another thing. But that's hardly difficult. I could grow a beard, which would no doubt make me

look completely different. Change my hairstyle. You'd be amazed how little it takes for someone to go unrecognised. I've read all about it. Oh, and another thing: glasses. I've been wearing contact lenses for the past ten years. If I were to replace those with spectacles, particularly big thick-rimmed ones, no-one would know it was me. And if someone did say that I bore a resemblance to 'that famous actor', I could simply shrug it off with "Yeah, I get that a lot". The psychology of the thing is surprisingly airtight."

"I see." He was holding his chin with his free hand. "I suppose that's not such a big issue. As you say, it's doable. Just."

I nodded encouragingly, although he still looked unimpressed.

"The thing that concerns me," he proceeded, "or rather, the *main* thing that concerns me, is that you want to convince the entire world that you've killed yourself. That's an awful lot of people you're gonna have to fool."

I had already put a lot of thought into that point, and was ready with an immediate reply.

"Is it, though? Is it really? I'm not so certain that I have to fool the entire world. How many people are going to have a direct connection with the evidence? The police. The media. That's about it. If we can convince them that I am dead, then they will spread the news to the rest of the world. Everyone else will practically fool themselves."

David scratched his chin, nodding contemplatively.

"It's a crazy idea," he said, "but I do see where you're coming from. And it *could* work." He took a slow sip of his drink. "And I heavily emphasise the 'could' there. It just seems like you're using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Are there really no other options?"

I could hear the exasperation in my own voice as I replied:

"Believe me, David, I've tried everything. If there were another way to escape I would have already done it. But there isn't. This is the only thing that's left. My last resort. If this doesn't work, well... I don't think anything will."

He sighed in resignation.

"You've thought this through so thoroughly, every last detail. Yes, it's bonkers. But if anyone can make it work it's you; I recognise that. I know you're not a fool." He stopped for a second before

carrying on. "If you're certain this has to be done, and that you can make it work...?"

"I am," I said without hesitation, looking him directly in the eye.

"Then I suppose you'd better do it. But I will not accept any responsibility. If it goes wrong, if you get sent to prison or something, it will be your problem. I simply can't risk my reputation on this as well."

I smiled weakly at him, and he smiled back, an expression of gladness mixed with deep worry. I was relieved. However, there was one more thing to be discussed, and it was going to be, for me, the hardest part of the whole conversation.

"Now, I know you said just a minute ago you didn't want any part in this..."

His eyes narrowed slightly when I said those words.

"... but the truth is, I do need your help. I can't do this alone."

"In what way do you need my help, exactly?"

I coughed nervously. "While my plan is overall quite simple, see, there are some little details that need to be sorted. Mainly financial ones, in fact. What happens to my money when I'm 'dead'? We need some way of transferring it to the account of my new identity."

"Hmm, true."

"It seems to me that the obvious way to do this would be through a will."

"Ah. I see where this is going. You want me, in my capacity as a solicitor, to make this will that leaves your money to a person who, strictly speaking, doesn't exist, and then to ensure the execution of this slightly dodgy last will and testament after you've faked your suicide. Is that it? I hope you realise that this is all highly illegal."

"I'm sorry. You have to believe me, this is the most difficult thing for me. I really don't want to drag you into this, but I wouldn't do it if it wasn't absolutely necessary."

"Ed, I want to help you, I genuinely do. But you're asking me to put my professional life on the line here. I can't do that. There's too much at stake."

"If we were to get found out, I promise I would assume full responsibility. Officially, you would know nothing about it. You'd be

clean. It would be me who'd have to deal with the consequences. Honestly, the risk to you would be tiny."

David sighed again, and finished off his drink.

"Look," he said, "It's getting late. I really do need to get back. This is all too much for me to take in at once. I will think about what you've said. And once I've made a decision I'll get in touch. But I just can't say yes or no at the moment."

He stood up, stretching.

"I'll think about it," he said in conclusion.

We bid each other farewell, and as soon as he had left I went straight up to bed, exhausted by the evening's deliberations. I only wished I could gauge exactly whether or not I had succeeded. Only time would tell.

Those were the last conscious thoughts I had before drifting into a light, fitful sleep.

Just after seven o'clock the following evening the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello. It's David."

"Oh." I waited for him to speak, but there was no sound. I prompted him: "And?"

"And... I've been your friend for a long time. Of course I want you to be happy. If you're going to do this, then you're going to need as good a chance of success as you can get. For that reason, and against my better judgment, I... I've decided that I will help you out. Just this once. But I want you to promise that the risk to me is minimal."

"You have my word."

"Good." I heard him cough. He must have a cold coming on. Or maybe he just couldn't think of anything else to say.

I continued the conversation:

"We'll need to meet up again sometime, in that case. We have to work out all of the details and how we're going to put this into practice."

We arranged our next meeting then, and in doing so set the ball rolling on what would become the greatest adventure of my life. The

months ahead now seemed so ambiguous and unclear. It was scary. It was also the most exhilarating feeling I had ever experienced.

Whatever it was, the future was coming. All I had to do now was make sure that I was ready to meet it when it arrived.

Chapter 5

Thursday 17th September 2009.

I sat on the sand, watching the waves break onto the cool beach before me in the moonlight.

It was a pleasant spot I'd found. Nice and secluded. Not a soul to be seen anywhere. The small bay was surrounded by dunes, and cliffs that reached up to the sky. A slight breeze tickled the light feathery grasses that had at one time sprung up out of the coarse sand, far enough back as to be safe from the incoming tide. It was so quiet, so peaceful. What a place. I vowed to go back there again one day, when all of the fuss had died down.

Behind me, further up the beach, was my car, a top-of-the-range Land Rover that I had bought when the money had started rolling in. I had driven it down the narrow road that had been carved out of the landscape to allow tourists and nature-lovers easy access to the beach. I wouldn't drive it again. I wouldn't need it again. It was just one of the many things I would be leaving behind.

The moon provided the only illumination in the darkness, lending everything an eerie glow. I felt a slight chill, and pulled my padded winter coat closer around me. There's a difference between a refreshing breeze and a cold wind, and this was edging nearer and nearer to the latter.

I had brought more clothes with me, but they were not for wearing. They were instead folded up neatly in a pile beside me, ready to be left for someone to find the next day. On top of them was an unmarked envelope containing a note that explained to the world many of the things I have explained to you in this chronicle, but with a few minor alterations. It detailed the intricacies of life from my point of view, and how I had become so dreadfully unhappy with my existence. It then went on to explain how I had decided that it could no longer continue, and why I had elected to end it all there and then.

On top of the envelope was a pebble, weighing it down.

It had been difficult for me to write that note, not because of the lies it contained but rather because of the surprising amount of truth that was in it. I had only needed to change a few tiny details to concoct this alternative version of reality. That put things into perspective for

me. It really made me think, about how there is often very little that separates one course of events from another. It could have gone any number of ways. I was glad I had chosen this one.

The past seven or eight months had been so hectic and stressful, it was strange to feel at peace for once. There had been a myriad of things to prepare. New accommodation to find, new papers to get hold of, new bank accounts to open, even a new appearance to manufacture and get accustomed to. But now it was done. And by the looks of things, thus far I'd gotten away with it. Thank goodness it was over now, though.

Something moved at the edge of my field of vision, and I turned my head lazily to see what it was that had caught my eye. I chuckled almost imperceptibly when I realised what it was. Just a crab, scuttling from one rock to the next. It was years since I'd seen a crab, even longer since I'd seen one in the wild. I started to think about all of the other things I'd missed out on over the past years. There was certainly a considerable number of them, too many to count. It would appear that I had a lot of catching up to do. A lot of living to do.

I was getting too cold to keep sitting. I stood up, stretching my legs, and shivered while I continued to look out to sea. Although I knew I was merely standing at the end of a piece of land, it felt like I was standing at the edge of creation. Teetering on the brink. Looking out to infinity.

Was it an ending? Was it a beginning? Perhaps the best word would be 'transition'. And what a transition. This was when everything changed. I tried not to think about it, but I couldn't help myself. It was daunting to consider everything I'd left behind, but even more daunting to think of all that lay ahead. I had to start my life again, from scratch. Everything would have to be built from the ground up, completely fresh. It was discomfiting to imagine how long and difficult that process would be. Would it really be worth it?

I knew that I still had the option to turn back now if I wanted to. It was tempting. So tempting. I knew that this was the last opportunity I would ever have to return to my old life. This was the point of no return.

There had been so many moments like this, moments where I had to make the choice between the safety of my past and the danger of my future. Up till then I had always managed to push myself to take that step into the unknown when I had needed to. This, though, was different. This was, unless I chose to back out, the end.

Or would it be a beginning?

Oh why was it so difficult to continue? Why was I suffering such inner torment *now*, when everything was so near completion? I had thought this would be the easiest part, not the hardest! This was what I wanted, what I *needed*! My liberation from the shackles that had bound me for all this time. Surely I wasn't having second thoughts now?

At that point a most unusual feeling came over me. It took me a little while to identify it, but when I did I recognised it as despair. Cold, unfeeling, bleak despair. Despair at life, despair at death, despair at this whole sorry state I had got myself into.

I felt very weary. Very tired.

The next thing I knew was that I was falling to my knees. It hurt as they collided with the compacted sand below, but I didn't care. The wind was blowing stronger now, battering me relentlessly and throwing my hair around wildly. It was all too much. I felt a familiar lump rise in my throat. It was all too much!

How had it come to this? How had I ended up here, resorting to this out of overwhelming desperation? Where had everything gone so terribly wrong?

And then, inexplicably yet inevitably, I dropped my head into my hands and wept uncontrollably, the waves crashing now onto the sand while the wind blew violently around me.

I must have stayed like that for several minutes. I didn't want to move any more, but eventually I managed to motivate myself to slowly rise to my feet again. I felt calmer now. I had a new sense of resolution. I knew what I had to do.

This was unavoidable – it had been for years. Deep down I knew that. I must have done, for otherwise I would never have brought myself to that place. I had a whole new life ahead of me. And it was going to start now.

I set off up the beach at a brisk pace. I needed to get going now anyway, as the spot was a favourite with dog walkers (that was partly why I'd chosen it), and they would soon begin to appear as the morning approached.

I didn't look back.

As I walked across the beach, before ultimately leaving it behind entirely, I started to smile. And then I started to laugh. Life was a funny thing. Just when you think there's no hope left, it throws you a second chance.

Maybe things were going to be alright after all.

Epilogue

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is John Burden. I've always liked that name. Whenever I hear someone call it I invariably feel a little jolt of excitement. *That's me!* I think, *That's who I am!* It sounds just a tiny bit pathetic now that I put these thoughts in writing, but nevertheless it is a continual source of amusement for me. I had initially expected the novelty to wear off fairly rapidly, but here I am almost a year later and it still makes me smile.

Last September I moved into my new home in the small village of Totforth in Kent. It was around the same time that that actor died... what was his name... Robson? Roland? I can never quite remember. You know who I mean, at any rate. It was all over the news at the time.

Previously, I had earned a moderate income as manager of a well-know high-street store, but the pressure and stress that I had been forced to endure had never been my cup of tea, and for that reason I had eventually made the decision to quit my job and move to the countryside, where I would be able to enjoy a more laid-back approach to life. It was, in many ways, a semi-retirement. Upon arriving, I had taken a job in a small grocery store, believe it or not, which was well-suited to me because it allowed me to engage on a personal level with a large cross-section of the community, something that I had always deemed to be of great importance in retail. It wasn't a massively challenging or high-powered occupation, but it was good fun and it paid the bills. That was all I really needed, anyway.

In my spare time I indulged my passion for acting (which had been obliged to lay dormant during my many years in business) through the village's amateur theatre group, who would often stage small-scale productions in the village hall. I had never been particularly good, and was especially rusty now, but they genuinely didn't mind. In a small place like that, they appreciated any help that came their way. Besides, as they always maintained, it wasn't the acting itself that was really important; it was the fun that we had trying!

Being a small place, there was a tremendous sense of community spirit as well. After moving into my new home it was only a matter of hours before the doorbell rang and I was greeted by my new

neighbours, who were eager to introduce themselves and invite me round for a cup of tea. We quickly became friends, which led to me meeting more people and building more friendships, until eventually I was acquainted with just about everyone in the village and they in turn knew me. It wasn't long before I was absorbed completely into the community and became an integral part of its workings. The welcome was so great and so complete that within a month of my arrival it felt to me as though I had lived there my entire life.

But the most important thing was, I was happy. At last I had found a place where I was fully accepted and where I could live in a manner that was perfect for me. I knew that now I had found my niche in the world. This was my own small piece of paradise. Nothing could ever make me let go of the happiness I found there.

And that more or less brings my tale to its conclusion. To this day I live out that same dream, always expecting to wake up into some sort of harsh reality, but never actually doing so. It seems clichéd, but so far this has been one case where I really did end up living happily ever after.

All of this because of one crazy idea that had come to me in the depths of misery. All this because of one fateful September day, one turning point in history when I had managed to free myself and start afresh.

My previous life has been firmly confined to the past, from whence it may never again resurface except as a pale, faded memory.

Good riddance to the past.

And here's to the future.