

The Problem of the Panelled Room: Part 2 (14/06/91)

Karen Yu

Friday morning. Back in the poky *Witness* office I tried again to reach Lisa.

“What hot lead is it now?” smirked Dominic Hunt as he parked himself on the corner of my desk. “Another haunted mask? Someone spotted Elvis on the Underground? Bigfoot sighting in Hyde Park?” I practiced my death stare on him as I dialled the number.

“You know, I admire your focus,” he continued, tipping back in his chair with foppish grace. “At a time when just about everything everywhere is kicking off – Gulf War, Yugoslavia, the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union – you still insist on reporting on the smaller stories.” He jabbed a pen in my direction as if struck by a thought. “It looks like apartheid’s on its last legs, if you want to avoid that as well.”

If I threw this paperweight at Dom hard enough, I wondered, could I kill him?

Someone picked up the receiver at the other end. “Hello?” said a half-English, half-American voice. Lisa.

“Hi Lisa,” I replied, swivelling away from Dom’s infuriating grin. “It’s Karen here – Karen Yu.”

“Oh, hi Karen.” Was that a note of reticence, even wariness, in her voice? “How did – how are you?”

“Well, Lisa, a little bird told me that you and Jared are leaving us tomorrow,” I lamented, “and the thought of not being able to say goodbye is just too sad. I mean – well, let’s just say we’ve been through quite a bit together.”

A relieved little laugh bounced down the line. “That’s an understatement,” she agreed. There was a pause; she seemed to be thinking something over. “You know what, Karen? It would be lovely to meet up one last time. So long as – you know, no shoptalk. No reporting.”

“Lisa,” I solemnly professed, “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Again that relieved laughter. “Bless you. That’s what I thought you were calling about at first – to try and arrange an interview or something.”

“Oh, Lisa,” came my pained reply. “You’d really think that of me? I thought we had a connection.”

“I know, I know,” apologised Lisa. “It’s just been a weird couple of weeks. A lot of bad energies around.”

I pulled my notebook closer. “So whereabouts are you staying right now?”

“I can’t remember if I mentioned? We’re with our friends in Soho.” Soho? How was she better connected in this city than someone forced to actually live here? “But, we’re all just about to head out for lunch. Tell you what,” she continued, and I think even now I could hear the jangle of armlet on bracelet, “Our friends are throwing a little farewell party for me and Jared tonight, if you’re interested? It will just be a few of us. You’d be very welcome.”

I certainly was interested. I thanked her for the invite, made a note of the address and told her I’d see her soon. Jared, I remembered with a shudder, I would have to try and avoid.

I stood up to get a coffee. “You’re still limping?” smirked Dom, still seated on my desk like a public school puck. “I thought you said you had a yoga lesson, not spine surgery.”

The paperweight glittered enticingly. Resisting the urge, I turned to face Dom with my most martyred air. “Someday, Dom, you’ll learn that real journalists have to put themselves in danger for the sake of the truth. Max du Preez endured drinking sessions with

death squads; I had to suffer downward bloody dog. We can't all sit on our arses thinking up flaccid jokes about Major and Kinnock."

"But there's so much material to be mined," he drawled, helping himself to one of my mints. "Seriously, have seen the cabinet recently? It looks like it's made up of outcasts from the Addams Family. And that's just their public personas." He leaned in confidentially. "I have it from a very good source that Norman Lamont can do a pitch-perfect impression of a scops owl. Now in what sordid act did he even discover he could do that?" Dom rolled the mint around his mouth and leaned back. "Besides, I'd hardly call outdoor aerobics dangerous."

"You don't know how inflexible I am," I replied, snatching back my mints with a scowl and continuing towards the kitchenette.

"As incandescent as your seduction technique is," called Dom, his floppy hair dancing mockingly around his face, "it's going to have to be a no, Karen." I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledgement as I hobbled away. "You still coming out with us for lunch today?"

"If you get off my desk I might."

In the cramped kitchenette I discovered Janet Foster leafing through a dog-eared notepad. "He's just jealous," she muttered into the notepad.

"Jealous?" I echoed, reaching round her for the kettle.

"When was the last time any of his stories blew up like your haunted mask?" she explained in her guarded voice, closing the notebook with a snap and looking up at me. "Did you really read all those letters Plover sent you?" she asked Clarice Starling.

I nodded grimly. "Well, most of them. After about the third suggestion of mind control gas I had to give up."

"That bad?" A suppressed smile spoiled the illusion of sympathy in Janet's expression.

"At times I felt like I was rewatching David Icke's interview with Terry Wogan," I replied, my inner martyr returning for an encore. "Although not all of them were quite that bad, to be fair."

"Any good suggestions?"

"Maybe one. That's what I'm following up tonight."

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I checked the address again. This was definitely the right place. I looked up at the town house before me with a mixture of awe and jealousy. It must be worth at least £250,000, I gawped as I counted the stories.

Around me London was warming up for another boisterous Friday night. Packed cabs sped by; families rushed to keep their table reservations; well-dressed couples trotted towards whatever frivolities awaited them in Soho that night. Somewhere around the corner the pubs roared. Before me, however, the dainty sounds of polite revelry clinked and twittered through the open windows. The distant plink of light jazz – not whale song, as I'd half expected – wafted through the air (scented with Chanel, not incense) from one of the many rooms of the house. Lisa's friends evidently considered the quest for a greater sense of self-value secondary to the quest for greater sense of financial value. I was glad I'd decided on the good blouse.

As for Lisa herself, there was no sign of the transatlantic sibyl. Someone I didn't know had answered the door. Someone else I didn't know gratefully accepted my bottle of wine. In fact, there were an awful lot of people I didn't know. A veritable scrum of well-dressed strangers milled and mingled throughout the ground floor; maybe thirty guests in total? Clearly, Lisa's idea of 'just a few friends' was a little more generous than mine.

Divested of my cabernet sauvignon, but now in possession of an equal weight of vol-au-vents and a glass of something undoubtedly more expensive, I began my search. It was a well-to-do coterie: stylish without being gauche; rich but not idle. People with slim figures and rounded vowels. Architects, writers, maybe a doctor or two? If you grow up in a house like White Gate you make wealthy friends, I supposed. For the first time I wondered what on earth it was that Jared sold for a living.

The house itself provided a welcome contrast to the Paris household. Clean, uncluttered. Bright blonde pine instead of dark dense mahogany. No weapons were fastened to the walls, I noticed with relief. Scanning the blazers and turtle necks I rolled Brian's theory (*hypothesis*, Charlie would insist) around my head again. Was it really possible? Would someone like Jared really go to such lengths for money? And what if, I reminded myself with a slight wobble, the theory (*hypothesis!*) was complete rubbish? What if Lisa really did see Jared out in the hallway? The whole thing would be blown to pieces. Back to square one.

My search was curtailed in the fashionably austere living room when I was ensnared by three shoulder-padded brunettes who all seemed to be called Debbie.

"You must be one of Lisa's friends," decided the three-headed being. Was I really blending in that well? Speaking of Lisa, had any of them seen—

"I knew it. Lisa always has the most interesting friends."

Ah. I was grateful for the wine.

"So have you come from Chinatown? You must have come from Chinatown, right? We walked through it on the way here, what an amazing place."

"No," I replied flatly. "Outer Mongolia, actually."

The same expression of vacant interest animated the faces of the three Debbies simultaneously. Was it going to be exotic or oriental tonight, I wondered? "I'm not sure I could even point to that on a map," laughed the one in the middle. "How very exotic. You speak excellent English, by the way."

With Herculean effort I managed to steer the conversation away from my exotic appearance and back to the party. "So how do you three know Lisa and Jared?" I asked.

"Oh, well, Debs and I knew Lisa from school, of course," answered Debbie II, as if I really ought to know this already. "And Deb – I think your mother knew Evelyn, yes?"

"Mm-hmm," confirmed Debbie III. "Back in Oxfordshire." She looked at me curiously. "So how did you and Lisa cross paths? I'm dying to know."

I took a sip of wine. "We met through her uncle, as it happens." At the mention of Andrew Paris the three Debbies simultaneously placed their hands to their breasts (their own, not each other's) and drew a mournful intake of breath.

"Have you heard the news?"

"Such a horrible thing to have happened."

"I never liked him, to be honest."

The amazing thing, they told me, was how Lisa was coping with all of this. But then she'd always been a strong spirit, even at school. Remember when she refused to take part in that dissection? And her husband – well, he's just the sweetest guy.

“How long have Lisa and Jared been married?” I asked, still scanning the room for a familiar face.

The Debbies consulted one another. “About three years, wouldn’t you say? They’re always off in America, it’s hard to keep track.”

“And they’ve always got on this well?”

No consultation needed this time. “Oh yes. Two peas in a pod. That man simply adores her.”

I glanced around the living room again, failing to peer over the heads and shoulders milling around me. “I don’t suppose any of you have actually seen Lisa yet?”

“Oh yes,” assured one of the Debbies. “She was here just a minute ago, when—” Recognition lit up her face. “Here’s a man who might be able to tell us,” she cooed, waving to someone behind me. I turned to see who it was. There, slinking silkily through the crowd, was Jared Gardner. The Don Johnson jacket and the smooth charm were back. Somewhere in my stomach something tensed. Catching Debbie’s wave, he smiled and sauntered over to our group.

“Karen,” he beamed, placing an arm around my shoulders and flashing his neat white teeth at me. “Lisa mentioned you’d be joining us tonight. Great, that’s just great. I’m very glad you could make it.” A little squeeze of my shoulder. I paid scant attention to the niceties that followed. I was distracted by John’s desk pushed up against the door of the panelled room. Had he been hiding there while I was in the room, just feet away from me as I crouched over the bleeding body of Andrew? Had he listened to my fumbled, flailing attempts to revive him? Had he even watched through some chink in the joining?

“You’re empty?” asked Jared, noticing my wine glass. “Let’s get you another drink.” His arm still around me, he steered me back towards the kitchen. The Debbies drifted out of my grasp like a life raft on the ocean.

Light jazz still burbled from some corner of the house. Topping up my glass, Jared dropped his voice and leant in slightly. “Karen, do you mind if we have a chat? Privately?”

I searched his well-proportioned face. He was still smiling, but something serious weighed down his expression. “Of course,” I replied woodenly. What did he know?

Jared led me upstairs and across a smart, carpeted landing. Away from the hubbub of the party the house seemed eerily quiet. He found a spare bedroom and ushered me in.

“What’s all this about, Jared?” I asked, attempting a light tone.

Jared quietly closed the door, the smile still stuck to his face. It was only now that I noticed the canvas bag he was carrying. No bigger than a shopping bag. I couldn’t make out what was inside.

“Where’s Lisa?” I pressed.

“Lisa? Oh, she’s around. With friends somewhere.” He drew the chair out from the dressing table and sat down, the canvas bag resting against his foot. I remained standing, arms folded. “Karen,” he said, tracing the crease of his trouser leg with his finger, “I know you’ve been quite set on solving this little puzzle of what happened to Andrew, but I’m not sure it’s such a good idea.”

A car horn smudged across the London dusk. “And what makes you say that?”

A gentle laugh escaped his smiling lips. “Don’t you think it’s all a bit morbid? Indecent, you know?”

I stood firm. “Someone tried to kill Andrew that night, Jared. And whoever it was has managed to get away with it so far. I don’t consider it indecent try and find out who.”

Jared's brown eyes searched mine for a moment. "You really think one of us did it?" "One of us?"

"Me, Lisa, the big guy, the old guy," explained Jared, catching himself in the mirror of the dressing table and smoothing the hair above his ear. Those brown eyes looked back at me. "You."

I took an unconscious step back. "Yes, Jared. If you want me to be honest with you, then yes. It had to be one of us."

"But did it? Are you sure you've got that right? Are you sure there weren't higher forces at work here?"

There was an intensity to his voice now. "Wait," I replied. "Do you still want me to believe that the mask is to blame?"

Jared spread his hands, eyebrows raised. "Is that really any crazier than you trying to tell me one of us can walk through walls?" Maybe one of us didn't need to. "Surely something like this should make us question our so-called certainties," he continued with increasing energy. "But people seem to be clinging to them even tighter than before." He shifted forward in his chair, massaging the back of his manicured hands. "Do you remember what we were talking about at Andrew's house that Saturday? About the true nature of life and death?" I said nothing. I wished he would stop smiling. "I think it's time we continued that discussion."

Jared glanced at the canvas bag, still resting against his foot. He shook his head slowly, as if deep in thought. "You know, this life we live – we act as if it's all there is. We hold on to it with such desperation. People do the strangest things when they think it's all about to end." His eyes reconnected with mine. "But you and I know that there's more to it than that. That there's so much beyond this one plane of existence that we can see around us." He reached into his bag. "And I think you're ready to explore it with me, Karen."

I'm ashamed to say that I did nothing. No attempt at self-defence; no disarming rejoinder. I didn't even try to flee. I simply stood there, arms folded, as a numb horror swept through my mind like a whiteout. I stood there as Jared pulled his hand out the bag. I stood there as he placed its contents on the dressing table. And I was still standing there as I saw the neat stack of paper he placed there. On the first page I could make out the typewritten words: *Ancient Echoes*.

I looked back at Jared dumbly. He seemed to be waiting for a response. No response came. "So, what do you say?" he finally prompted. "Will you give this book of ours a look-over? You know, like a proof read?"

The whiteout slowly began to recede. "You just want me to read your book?" I managed to ask, woozy with relief.

"If you wouldn't mind," grinned Jared. "As you know, Lisa and I are heading home tomorrow, so could you post it back to us? Here, I'll give you our address." He thumbed through his wallet and passed me a business card. I accepted it with numb fingers.

"And all that talk about life and death and other planes of existence – you – you were talking about Lisa's past lives?"

"Of course," replied Jared, nudging the manuscript towards me. "What did you think I was talking about?"

"Andrew's shooting, maybe?" I cried, incredulous at his incomprehension. "The man who nearly died the other week?"

Jared jumped up from his seat in honest apology. “Karen – oh, I – I had no idea that’s what you were thinking. Sorry if – if I spooked you there.” He glanced at the paper on the dressing table. “Maybe I should have opened by showing you the manuscript.”

“Maybe,” I moaned, sitting down on the edge of the bed. I suddenly felt exhausted. “So you really do think it was the Hungry Corpse that shot Andrew?”

Jared’s gaze was certain. “Yes. Like I told you that very morning back at White Gate.”

To hell with it. “Jared, did you really sleep through those gunshots?”

Now he stopped smiling. “Pardon?” he asked after far too long a pause.

“On that Sunday morning at White Gate I was asking you what you did when Andrew was shot. Why it took you so long to get to the panelled room,” I explained. “And you said you it was because you didn’t hear the gunshots.”

Jared nodded weakly, his body rigid. Brittle, even.

“Those gunshots shook the entire house, Jared. I know you said you’re a heavy sleep, but you’d have had to have been catatonic to sleep through them.”

“Well,” he muttered. “That might have been – in a manner of speaking – not quite entirely true.” His good looks sagged with bitter self-pity.

“In other words, it was a lie?” No response. “Jared, did you hear those gunshots?”

A nod, so slow I didn’t notice it at first. “I heard them,” he admitted.

He looked so pitiful standing there I could no longer feel afraid of him; the author of *Ancient Echoes*, I realised, posed no threat to anyone except his readers. “Then why didn’t you tell me?”

Jared sank back into the chair as if his bones had turned to jelly. “Because I did nothing. I heard those gunshots. Of course I did. I heard them and I did nothing.” He dabbed the corner of his eye with his sleeve and let out a thin, wavering breath. “And I knew Lisa had left the bedroom just a few minutes earlier. It could have been her for all I knew. But I just lay there. Too afraid to do anything.” Jared forced himself to make eye contact with me, wincing as if it caused him physical pain. “By – by the time I’d made myself go downstairs, you – everyone – was already up. That scientist guy was already in the hall calling for an ambulance. You and Lisa were in that study. It – it wasn’t until Lisa opened the study door that I even knew she was OK.”

Somewhere in the mess of my mind a light flicked on. “Jared, did you just say that you saw Charlie in the hall when you came downstairs?”

“Yeah.”

“And did he see you?”

“Yeah, he did. I remember making eye contact with him. Why?”

“So if I talk to Charlie he’ll be able to vouch for you being in the hall when Lisa opened the door?”

“What are you talking about?”

It was true. As I would discover later that night – confirmed by none other than the scientist guy himself – Jared had indeed been descending the stairs when Charlie was on the phone in the hall. He was already outside the door when Lisa unlocked it; the idea of him hiding under the desk was out of the question. If only I’d thought to ask Charlie originally, I thought cheerlessly, I could have saved myself a lot of time.

We sat there in silence for what seemed like a long time. I picked up the stack of paper and flicked through the pages. My heart sagged when I felt its weight. “So I – I’d be

very happy to look through your book, of course. How many past lives did you say Lisa has?"

"Five."

"Five? Wow." Perhaps it would have been less awkward if Jared had actually murdered me.

Jared cleared his throat. "I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about this."

A waved a dismissive hand. "Your secret's safe with me." His smile rekindled. "Let's head back downstairs."

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We rejoined the party and headed in separate directions. Another false theory; another dead end. Maybe it really was the mask, I sulked. After all – as Jared had said – it made just as much sense as any other purportedly rational explanation.

I was in no mood to endure another meandering conversation with Lisa and began searching for the nearest door or window I could escape from. Just as I found a promising-looking balcony, however, I was again cornered by one of the shoulder-padded Debbies, who had somehow managed to separate herself from her symbionts. "Now, if you ask me," she resumed, as if I'd never left the previous conversation, "the police ought to be taking a closer look at that detective chap."

The comment roused me from my ruminations. "I – wait, the detective?"

"Mm-hmm," she nodded eagerly, picking something off the lapel of her teal blazer. "You know, Andrew's old friend."

"Brian?" I was intrigued, despite myself. "Brian Docherty?"

"Mm-hmm."

I put my escape plans on hold for just a moment. "What makes you say that?" I prodded, picking up a fresh wine glass from a nearby table.

"Well," answered Debbie, lowering her voice as if the old detective might have bugged the furniture, "he's the only person to have been at both shootings, wasn't he? Andrew's and John's? That is," she added, her voice little more than a whisper, "the only person to be at both and not get shot."

I tipped my head in thought for a second. "Well I can't deny that," I acknowledged. "But that doesn't mean he did it. Nor does it explain how he could have appeared and disappeared from that room."

"But that's just the thing," continued Debbie excitedly, "who was it that told us that?"

"Told us what?"

"Told us that Andrew couldn't have shot himself?"

I found a bottle and filled my glass. "It was Brian who found out about the gun residue, if that's what you mean." It was also Brian, I realised with a slight lurch, who had told me just about everything I knew about the crime scene: that there were no fingerprints on the gun or footprints in the study; that the door to the panelled room couldn't be forced; that the police never checked for residue on John. In fact, my entire understanding of the case rested largely on Brian's pronouncements. How hadn't I seen this before?

Debbie gave me a knowing look. "You begin to see what I mean?"

Come to think of, Brian never did tell me what he'd been doing in the panelled room when Charlie and I happened to find him there last week. Maybe he's the reason *why* no one

found any footprints or fingerprints? Or maybe I was listening to the wine-stained cogitations of a woman who thought I came from Outer Mongolia. “Wait a minute, Debbie. Even if Brian had a reason to lie about the case, he couldn’t have been the person who pulled the trigger. The doors to the house were all locked that night, remember? No one could have got in from outside.”

“What about the French windows? The ones in the dining room?”

“French – ?”

Before I could follow Debbie’s intimation further, however, a familiar jangle cut through my thoughts. “Is that what I think it is?” called Lisa, motioning to the manuscript still in my hand as she breezed towards us in a light blue summer dress. She’d lost none of her California tan during her stay in England. Her wavy blonde hair still looked fresh from Sunset Beach. Her jewellery glittered and clattered like chain mail.

“So what do you think?” she asked, scooping me up into one of her everlasting embraces.

“I haven’t had a chance to read it just yet,” I eventually managed to answer, disentangling myself from the chains and links and rings and clasps. “Jared’s only just given it to me.”

“So what do you think?” repeated Lisa. We were in the garden by now, Lisa having cajoled me to take a minute (or sixty) from the party to give her my thoughts on the introduction. There were no chairs, so we sat on the edge of the patio, our feet on the small daisy-speckled lawn before us. It had been a warm evening, but the last of the day’s heat was leaving us quickly now.

I looked up from the typewritten pages, grateful the wine hadn’t loosened my tongue to the point of honesty. And yet when I connected with those earnest hazel eyes I felt a sudden surge of pity for Lisa. There was something endearing – or perhaps pathetic – about the way she treasured this utter nonsense. She first became interested in New Age thinking, she’d told me, when she was thirteen, about the time she moved to the States. About the time, in other words, that she lost her dad unexpectedly. About the time she was dragged halfway across the world by a mother who – to judge from her actions if nothing else – was a capricious and vindictive woman. About the time even happy girls feel the urge to rebel and reject. Small wonder she clung to these ridiculous beliefs with the tenacity of someone accustomed to having things snatched away from her.

I remembered she was waiting for an answer. “It’s – it is something else,” I pronounced, hoping the involuntary shake of my head would be taken for awed disbelief. Were these past lives simply her way of escaping her own life? Was it really as simple as that?

“I knew you would like it,” prophesised Lisa.

“Although,” I ventured, unable to stop myself, “you might want to consider finding a synonym for energy. And cleanse. Those words pop up a lot. And what,” I continued, pointing to an ungainly clump of letters on page four, “is this word?”

Lisa leaned in close. A wave of her blonde hair washed over my hand. “Xyynathana. My name when I was an Atlantean priestess,” she explained matter-of-factly. “The second Y is silent.”

I shivered against the cooling air. Wasn’t she cold in that dress? “What are you plans for when you get back?” I asked. “Besides the book, obviously.”



Lisa gazed up into the London night sky, that tumbling red mess of light pollution and exhaust fumes, searching in vain for a star. “I really don’t know,” she sighed. “This holiday hasn’t exactly gone to plan. I think I’ll need some time to reassess and rebalance before I think about doing anything. Human being, not human doing, right?”

“Right. And you – you don’t you want to stay around until he’s – awake? You know, until Andrew’s conscious?”

Lisa shook her head slowly. “No. That sounds horrible, doesn’t it?” I attempted some sympathetic noises. “But the hospital say he’s going to be fine, so I’m not sure what use it will be for me and Jared to hang around.” She played absently with a strand of her hair. “And the truth of the matter is that we’ve never been close. Me and Andrew.”

“I think that was clear.”

Lisa brushed her bare foot across the damp and chilly grass. “Do you ever get the feeling,” she wondered, looking at the lawn, “that he can read your thoughts?”

I did. I might even had said so in print. I felt it the first time Andrew and I met, when, Aztec knife in hand, he grilled me on the dangers of witchcraft superstition. I felt it again at the dinner party when, fish knife in hand, those icy blue eyes connected with mine during one of Lisa’s spiritual admonishments. *I know, I know*, that sardonic gaze seemed to say, *I also struggle to believe she’s related to me*.

“The Mayans and the Aztecs appreciated the power of crystals,” Lisa had been insisting as Andrew served the salmon. “As did the Egyptians and Babylonians and many other ancient peoples.” *Christ, crystals now? Is there nothing too imbecilic for this woman?* “And it’s only now that we’re rediscovering the wisdom of these cultures.” Jared gazed adoringly upon his wife as if she were explaining how she’d cured cancer.

“Does that explain the lump of amethyst around your neck?” asked Andrew dryly as he returned to the head of the table.

Lisa regarded her uncle with something like respect. “Now you’re getting it, Andrew,” she smiled, holding up the necklace for us all to see. “This crystal contains a powerful life force. It’s at the same frequency as the human body.”

“What’s the same frequency as the human body?” demanded Andrew.

“The crystal.”

“What part of it?”

“It’s vibration, of course.”

“Of course. And is this vibration something that can be detected? Measured? Can you feel the crystal vibrating as you hold it?”

“Well – no. But then can you feel your own body’s vibrations?” It was about this point in the evening that the patina of bewilderment began to glaze Charlie’s face. “I mean, ultimately we’re all made of crystals, right?”

“Wrong.”

“Then explain DNA.”

I wondered whether Brian could be tempted to regale us with another of his woodwork projects. *Don’t you dare*, warned an icy flash from those eyes. *If I have to hear about his new seed tray storage unit one more time this evening might turn ugly*.

“You know he used to live with us?” asked Lisa, sitting beside me in the garden once more. “Uncle Andrew. He lived with us in White House when I was a girl there.”

“He and your dad must have been close. All that travelling together.” I closed the manuscript and placed it on the patio. “God knows I couldn’t live with my sister.”

Lisa was lost in memory for a moment. “They bickered. I remember that. But then I remember them joking around too. I guess I never understood their relationship.”

“Maybe they were just brothers,” I suggested. “You know, Andrew still gets upset about your dad’s death. I can tell. It bothers him.”

Lisa let out a bitter little laugh and faced me. Tears rimmed her eyes. “Does it?” she asked, and I was surprised by the venom in her voice. “Does it really bother him? Do you really think he cares about my dad? About me?” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “He only ever cared about himself.” She seemed on the verge of saying something else, but returned to inspecting the grass under her feet. I had no idea what to say.

“My dad used to write to me every week when we moved out to California,” she eventually continued, her anger replaced by a soft sadness. “You know how often Uncle Andrew sent me letters? Not once.”

In the back of my mind something stirred. Letters? “Letters?”

Lisa sniffed and nodded. “Yeah. What do you mean?”

Good question. What did I mean? It was as I was dismissing the matter with a flutter of my hand that I remembered: John’s letter to Evelyn. The one I found in the panelled room last week and snuck into my backpack – the one that was never sent for some reason. With a guilty shock I realised that I had completely forgotten about it. That unopened letter was probably still at the bottom of my backpack.

At that moment the patio door rattled open and a shoulder-padded silhouette stepped out of the kitchen. Debbie the First, Second or Third, I wondered? “Lisa?” she called. “We’re thinking about heading home now. It was lovely to catch up with you.”

Wiping her eyes one more time, Lisa rose to her feet. By the time she was upright she had transformed back into the tall, tanned, jangling woman I first met in the hall of White Gate just two weeks ago.

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When I got home I rummaged around my flat for my backpack. By the fridge, for some reason. Opening it up, I found the crumpled letter to Evelyn Paris that I’d taken from White Gate. I looked at the looping handwriting on the envelope and wondered about John Paris properly for the first time. What had he been like?

I smoothed out the envelope and turned it over. The flap, if it had ever been stuck down, had long since lost its stick. Delicately, as if I were dealing with something far older, I teased out the letter. It was a single sheet of stiff brown paper. I read it, stood up, re-read it, sat down, and read it once more before lunging for the phone.

“Charlie,” I said, “we need to return the Hungry Corpse.”