

The Problem Panelled Room

What happened to Andrew Paris on the night of Saturday 1st June?
KAREN YU attempts to make sense of it all for *Witness*

F For anyone who's been following the news and speculation swirling around Andrew Paris, let me start by saying I'm just as confused as you. And I was there.

Regular *Witness* readers may recall that our 13th May edition featured my interview with the writer, presenter and (in)famous debunker Andrew Paris. The interview had been fun, but I thought nothing more of it once I'd submitted my article. Then, a little over a week after the interview was published, I received a letter from Andrew's niece, a woman named Lisa Gardner, who happened to be visiting her uncle and chanced upon my article. She had written to alert me to a mistake – if it can be called that – in the piece. I had mentioned that her father and Andrew's older brother, John Paris, had taken his own life in October 1973. This, after all, is how it was reported in the news at the time. For Lisa, however, there were far more sinister forces at play. She directed me to one of her father's books, 1968's *Adventures in the Southern Hemisphere*, a *Boys' Own* romp through the jungles of New Caledonia. In one chapter, her father relates the discovery/theft of a curious tribal mask. This mask is greatly feared by the locals – who, as tradition dictates, are only ever depicted as cowering savages – for its propensity to strike people dead with its sinister supernatural powers. John's expedition duly ignore the warnings, retrieve the mask and, surprise surprise, inadvertently unleash its primeval horror. Very *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

But this was no work of fiction to Lisa. For it was this mask, she insisted, that was responsible her father's death. By extracting it from the New Caledonian rainforests and bringing it back to England, she explained, he had unwittingly brought the curse along with it. The proof? This mask was on display in John's study the night he was found dead.

I was still digesting this remarkable letter when, just a few days later, I received a fax from Andrew. Lisa, who was still staying with him, had told him about her letter and her belief in the mask's curse. This was too much for the old sceptic. After a decade disproving myths I suspect he was more than a little embarrassed at the thought of having one take root in his very own home. He had therefore devised an experiment, he explained to me, that would prove that the mask was not haunted in any way – and would I be so kind as to be there for it? It was technically an invitation, but I suspected that I had very little say in the matter.

And so it was, on the afternoon of Saturday 1st June, that I found myself once again bouncing up Andrew Paris' imposing driveway in my less-than-imposing Austin Metro. Once again his home, White Gate, reared up before me, a glorious Victorian mess of spires, shingles, towers and turrets. I was about to describe it as sprawling, but in terms of floor space the house isn't all that big. Rather, it has the feel of a sprawling house that has somehow been condensed or concentrated. The décor seems more crowded, the

colours richer, the parquet flooring more intricate. Even the grandfather clock seems to tick with greater intensity.

Stepping out of my car, I wondered what lay in store. I had briefly tried to prepare for the evening before swiftly coming to the conclusion that some things in life cannot be prepared for. Two adults had independently contacted me to discuss, in all seriousness, a haunted mask that kills people by magic. I confess I thought the whole thing faintly ridiculous. At least it would make a unique story, I told myself. Besides, on my previous visit I had spied Andrew's venerable drinks cabinet, and thought I could at least sit back and watch this slightly unhinged family drama play out with a glass of something expensive in my hand.

Was I being naive? Perhaps. But how was I to know what would happen that night? The sun was still shining, the birds were still singing, my car hadn't broken down; on that warm June afternoon, with big buttery clouds gliding lazily overhead, it was difficult for even a house as cramped and creaky as White Gate to feel sinister. Ignorance is bliss, as they say.

Andrew Paris answered the door and welcomed me once again into his remarkable home. Every square inch, it seemed, was covered in curios from a lifetime of travel. I recognised a pair of Arabic scimitars and a waist-high amethyst geode from my previous visit. As we walked through the over-decked hallway I tried to find out more about the evening's experiment, but my host divulged little. All he would say was that we were being joined by two authorities on the mask: an anthropologist familiar with the folklore of Melanesia, who could give us a level-headed account of New Caledonian curses, and a retired police detective who was there when Andrew discovered his brother's body almost eighteen years ago, and was therefore best placed to tell us whether there was anything suspicious about John's death. I was here, he continued, as the impartial witness: someone who could be trusted to record the results of his experiment. Oh, and Lisa and her husband Jared were here too.

It was then that I heard the jangle of bracelets. A woman not much older than me swept into the hallway, her long chiffon skirt trailing behind her. She looked at me as if we were long-lost sisters. "You must be Karen," she beamed in an accent stuck somewhere between Kensington and California. "So wonderful to finally meet you." Finally? I hadn't even replied to her letter. Apparently that didn't matter, for I then found myself in her clattering, incense-infused

embrace. After far too long we disengaged, although I noticed her hands were still resting on my shoulders. "However," she continued, breathing in deeply, "I feel we've already met in a sense. You know what I mean."

"You must be Lisa."

She nodded sagely. "Exactly."

Lisa was tall and tanned, with long blonde hair crashing in waves over shoulders. Jewellery and gemstones dangled from every limb and clung to every digit; I made out a hamsa, a taijitu and dharma chakra among the glittering morass, and I was sure it would only be a matter of time before I discovered a crucifix and a full-size menorah somewhere on her person. Her long, lithe arms spoke of outdoor exercise and oat bran muffins. I couldn't work out if she was beautiful or not.

I was grateful when Andrew intervened. "Let's get you a drink," he grinned, winking at me companionably. He led me and Lisa to the kitchen, which, to my surprise, was light, airy and modern, a striking contrast to the bric-a-brac density of the rest of White Gate. The oven was already humming and enticing smells were beginning to fill the air. (Andrew Paris, as I would soon discover, was a keen and talented cook.) By the island counter and bowls of nibbles stood two men, one tall, tubby and blond and the other short, slim and brunet. Lisa placed a clattering arm around my shoulders and motioned to the brown-haired man.

"This," she said, "is my husband, Jared."

Jared Gardner was already on his way to greet me. He too was tanned and svelte, and his well-proportioned face wore a bright, breezy smile. He shone with an easy, natural confidence, and appeared utterly at home in his light Don Johnson jacket. "Karen," he greeted me in his smooth West Coast tenor, "so nice to finally meet you. Lisa's told me all about you."

"She must have been consulting my star chart," I replied, probably failing to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"And this," interjected Andrew, handing me a glass of white wine and gesturing to the other man, "is Dr Charles Woolham, something of an expert in the folklore of the Pacific. He was an advisor on one of my episodes last year." Dr Woolham, inexplicably caught off guard by this introduction, had been halfway through a breadstick at the mention of his name, and was now desperately juggling wine and nibbles as I approached to shake hands. But I had approached too soon, and as our hands met the breadstick was still poking straight out of his mouth. I saw the silent panic fill in his baby blue eyes.

Charles – or Charlie, as he insisted on being

called once he'd finished the breadstick – was nothing like the aged antiquarian my mind had conjured at the mention of his name. Indeed, were it not for his height – well over six foot, I guessed – he would have looked far too young to have a PhD after his name. A great dollop of blond hair sat shapelessly on his head, as if someone had upturned a tub of vanilla ice cream there. Under this sheltered the ghost of a blond moustache, fluttering above his upper lip like a perched moth. The overall impression was one of scatter-brained scholasticism; with his large, wire-framed glasses and evident lack of physical coordination, he looked like he would have been very much at home on University Challenge.

"I've got to say, Andrew," declared Jared, addressing the whole room, "when are you going to tell us what's going on here?"

"Just as soon as the salmon's done," replied Andrew at his most sanguine, peering placidly at the oven timer. I got the clear impression that Andrew Paris enjoyed being in control of any given situation, even if that could only be achieved by keeping everyone else in the dark. "Besides," he added, skewering an olive with a cocktail stick, "we're still waiting for Brian to show up. God knows what's taking him so long. He only lives down the road."

As if waiting for the cue, there then came a knock at the kitchen window. A bald, portly man somewhere in his late sixties waved at us briefly before plodding round to what I presumed was the back door. A moment later Brian Docherty, Andrew's retired police detective, shuffled into the kitchen, locked in fierce battle with the zip of his smoke-stained acrylic jacket. "Bloody thing," he mumbled, looking up at us with an apologetic smile. Andrew's experts, I noted with muted alarm, seemed confounded by the simplest of obstacles.

Jared glided over to me. "So Lisa tells me you're a writer, Karen?" he asked, giving me another flash of his neat white teeth. I was beginning to wonder if he ever stopped smiling.

"That's right," I replied with the well-worn caution of a woman used to having her job misunderstood.

"Wow," he marvelled, shaking his head in wonder as if I'd revealed I was about to scale Mount Everest for charity. "So what do you write about?"

"Oh, all sorts," I answered evasively. "People and politics, I suppose you could say."

"Wow," he repeated with the same awed shake of his head.

"So what do you do?"

"Jared works in sales," answered Lisa, clinking into view. "But, you know—" she glanced at him adoringly "—he's something of a writer himself."

"Oh?" I took a sip of wine. It did indeed taste good.

Jared glanced between me and Lisa with rehearsed bashfulness. "I'm sure Karen doesn't want to hear about that," he responded, waving a hand dismissively. "It's a book," he continued in the same breath. "We're thinking of calling it *Ancient Echoes*. And Lisa's being far too modest crediting it to me alone. It's a collaboration, like everything in our lives."

There was nothing for it. Down the rabbit hole we go. "And what's this book about, Jared?"

"It's an autobiography, of sorts," replied Lisa. "Karen, are you familiar with the ancient art of channelling?"

"I've heard of it," I replied, groaning inwardly.

Lisa's hazel eyes regarded me knowingly. "I thought you would. It's something Jared and I have become fascinated with over the past few months. Especially since —" here she placed a hand on her heart "—it appears I'm a particularly receptive vessel in the field of reincarnation. You see, Jared and I are exploring my past lives through channelling." Let the record show that Lisa Gardner remained straight-faced throughout. "I've so far connected with five of my previous incarnations. They include a Russian aristocrat, a Chippewa medicine man and even an Atlantean priestess. Plus two poor people." She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. "It's been a real spiritual odyssey." I nod along, scanning the room for emergency exits. "And Jared's writing it all up." Lisa lovingly tucked a strand of her husband's hair behind his ear. "He's got such a way with words."

"Say," suggested Jared with the practiced spontaneity of a true salesman, "why don't the three of us capitalise on this moment? Karen, we can give you a sneak preview of the book, and in return maybe you could give us a few pointers? Professional tips, you know?"

I opened my mouth to reply, wondering how non-committal my response could be, but before I could say anything Andrew once again came to the rescue. "Karen," he announced, "this is Brian, an old friend of the family. He'll be joining us tonight."

I turned to greet Brian Docherty with overflowing gratitude. With his bald head, plodding gait and corduroy-based wardrobe he was a man settling unconcernedly into old age. His bland expression gave the impression of someone who thought little and felt less, but those clear grey eyes belied an intelligent and sceptical mind. He struck me as a gruffly amicable man, someone who would neither take nonsense nor dish it out.

"So you're the journalist who wrote that

interview with Andrew?" he enquired amiably as he shook my hand. "How did you get stuck with that job, eh?" I joined him in his laughter with undeserved gusto, keenly aware that no joke could be worse than the spiritual odyssey of past life regression.

"Detective Docherty?" cried Lisa from behind me. "Is that you?"

Brian beamed when he recognised John Paris' daughter. "My God," he gawped, "since when did you get so tall?" Lisa embraced him, and I admit I felt a little relieved to know the extra-long hugs weren't reserved just for me. Out of the corner of my eye I spied Charlie, still hovering uncertainly by the nibbles, and wondered with grim curiosity how ungainly the meeting between him and Lisa must have been.

"I was going to suggest we eat outside," grumbled Andrew, glowering out the window, "but it looks like it's clouding over. What rubbish weather we've had these past few weeks." He returned to the centre of the kitchen and clapped his hands together heartily. "Dining room it is. Dinner is served."

The six of us ambled into the dining room, which was, in true White Gate style, cluttered with obscure artefacts. Andrew sat at the head of the table, Brian opposite him. Lisa and Jared took up one side and Charlie and I the other. "Sorry about the breadstick," mumbled Charlie bashfully. "As first impressions go that probably ranks in my top five."

"Don't worry about it. Believe me, you'll have to try harder than that if you're going to beat Shirley MacLaine over there for uncomfortable conversations," I replied, nodding conspiratorially across the table towards Lisa. "I'd strap in if I were you. I think this evening's going to be an odd one."

My fear of an impending contretemps was premature, however. In fact, I rather enjoyed the next hour: the food was delicious, the wine was plentiful and the conversation – for now – remained cordial. Even Brian's attempt to describe in depth his latest woodwork project failed to capsize the buoyant mood. It wasn't until we'd finished the main that I was reminded why we'd all been summoned here.

"OK, Andrew," cajoled Lisa as she pushed her plate away. "You said you'd tell us what this so-called experiment of yours is all about." She looked round the table genially. "And we're still none the wiser."

Andrew took a slow sip of his wine. "Fair

enough," he eventually replied, setting his glass down. "I thought we should allow ourselves a little levity before diving into the subject of tonight's discussion. Seeing as it is somewhat gloomy." He checked his watch. "But time is pressing on. Alright." He assumed a baronial air as he addressed us from the head of the table. "As you all know, the six of us are here to discuss John's death." Finally Jared's smile flickered and faltered. Lisa, however, adopted a self-assured resolve

at the mention of her father. It conveyed a strength and composure I hadn't credited her with.

"It's no secret," continued Andrew, "that Lisa and I have very different views on what happened to John. I maintain that it was suicide, plain and simple. Lisa,

however, has suggested to me and Miss Yu that John was killed by supernatural means." To his credit he kept a straight face. "And she points to a tribal mask in John's old study, known as the Hungry Corpse, as the source of these supernatural forces – a mask she believes to be cursed or possessed in some way." He looked at his niece. "Is that a fair summary?"

Lisa returned his gaze warily. "A little crude, but yes, I suppose so."

Andrew pressed on. "Now, I am not normally the type of person to air my dirty laundry in public. But when it comes to John's death, I think it's important we resolve the matter. It hardly seems fair to the old boy to keep bringing up his death as if it were just another intriguing mystery to solve." I felt a cold sobriety creep back into my veins. The mellow merriment which filled the room just minutes ago had evaporated, and a taut silence was expanding to fill its place. As if sensing the change in mood, the weather too had begun to darken; outside the dining room's French windows heavy grey clouds crowded out the evening sun, casing us into a premature gloom. Andrew flicked on the chandelier. "Tonight I'd like to settle this issue, so that we can all move on. Lisa, you're family, and I've always been kind enough to ignore you when you talk about your New Age bull—" a slight cough "—beliefs. But if you're going to drag John into it then that's where I have to draw the line." Andrew attempted a sympathetic tone. "I just don't think that's what your father would have wanted."

If any of this had upset Lisa I was unable to tell. She softly shook her head, tutting benevolently. "You're trying to be rational again, Uncle Andrew."

For a second the unflappable Andrew Paris was flapped by this remark. I sensed this was not how he planned the conversation would go. "But of course I'm trying to be rational," he blurted back after a moment's flummoxed silence. "One of us has to be."

**"Tonight we are going to prove,
conclusively, that the curse of the Hungry
Corpse is pure fantasy"**

"And that's where you're going wrong," replied Lisa forgivingly. "You say you want to get to the bottom of dad's death, but you've already made up your mind about it. You insist that everything must be rational and logical and follow rules and laws. But the world isn't as simple as that. There's so much more that you're not seeing, because you won't allow yourself to see it."

Jared's smile warmed up again. "Lisa says it's like trying to look at a Van Gogh through a coloured lens. You're only seeing a fraction of the whole picture."

Lisa clasped her husband's hand and nodded deferentially to the wisdom of her own words. "Exactly, Jared. *Exactly*." She faced the rest of us, tinkling like a wind chime. "Jared's part Cherokee, so he should know. But you don't need to take our word for it. All sorts of native peoples have known this for thousands of years. Yoga, meditation, tai chi—" here she gestured to me for some reason "—all these ancient practices are about connecting with the universe at a more holistic level. In fact, the West is just about the only culture which seems unable to achieve this deeper connection." She smiled sadly. "And just look at the state we're in: disillusionment, depression, discontentment."

I glanced round the table like the social rubbernecker I am. Beside me, Charlie had retreated behind a veil of bewilderment. Brian was still chasing the remnants of his meal around his plate, his placid expression inscrutable. Andrew, for his part, appeared exhausted from self-restraint, pinching the bridge of his nose with concentrated irritation. Only Jared seemed to be enjoying his wife's sermon.

Lisa seemed unfazed by or unaware of her less than rapturous audience. "And that's what people like Jared and I are finally learning to embrace. That the universe is so much more complicated – and beautiful – than we first thought. That there are answers beyond the black and white of science. I mean, how can any of us claim to really know what's true?" she laughed, palms heavenward.

"That's easy," answered Brian from the end of the table. I think even Andrew jumped at his voice. It was as if the sideboard had suddenly started speaking. The old detective looked up from his plate and regarded us mildly. "Evidence. Fingerprints. Footprints. Photos. Recordings. If you can touch it, you can trust it. So to speak. Always worked for me in my forty-odd years in the force."

Jared countered with beneficent reproach. "But that can't be all there is, sir. I mean, if that's the case, then how do you explain all the mystics who help with police investigations? They're able to divine information that they couldn't possibly have

known from the physical evidence."

Now it was Brian's turn to laugh. "Oh yes," he sighed, gazing fondly into the middle distance. "We had a few of those over the years. One chap came to us in the seventies claiming to have received a vision from Lord Lucan. Said he was working at a chip shop in Barnsley. Funniest little fella. Would only ever shake your left hand." Brian topped up his wine glass, chuckling at the recollection. "Can I tell you a secret?" he asked us affably. "The police do use mystics, but not as you might think. In some cases a vital piece of evidence comes from someone we need to protect – say it's a vulnerable witness. We obviously need the evidence to secure a conviction, but we don't want to put the witness in any danger. So, if we can, we'll publicly credit some clairvoyant with pointing us to the piece of evidence. The witness avoids the limelight, and the medium, or whatever they are, is so delighted with the attention that they'll happily take the praise, even if they never actually made the prediction we're crediting them with. So that's how they're sometimes able to make those uncanny premonitions: we tell them."

Andrew smirked in approval. "So in all your time investigating crime, Brian, did you ever come across any evidence that might suggest the existence of the paranormal?"

The old man shook his head pleasantly. "No. A pity really, because I know how much it would have teed you off."

Lisa relented with deliberate grace. "Very well," she acceded to her uncle indulgently. "Let's do your little debunking thing."

Andrew replaced his glasses with an air of triumph. His evening was back on track. "Very well. Let's begin." The Baron of White Gate regarded his guests with renewed interest. "Dr Woolham here will give us an academic description of the Hungry Corpse and any associated folklore, so that we can investigate the origins of the claim that some sort of evil spirit resides in the mask. Brian will recount the circumstances of John's death, to see if it could have been anything other than suicide. And then," he added cryptically, "it will be over to me. Tonight we are going to prove, conclusively, that the curse of the Hungry Corpse is pure fantasy." Suddenly he stood up. "God, I almost forgot the pavlova. Just a second."

The pavlova, I'm sorry to say, did little to lighten the heavy atmosphere that had permeated the dining room. If anything, the din of cutlery on china only served to rankle the nerves further. Outside, the wind was picking up.

"Let's get into it," began Andrew Paris abruptly, and I felt for a moment as if I were in his television show. "All this hoo-ha dates back to April 1965. John and I were in New Caledonia, where we joined a search party looking for an English anthropologist – some chap who'd managed to get himself lost in the northern mountains. You've all read the chapter in John's book?" Everyone but Brian nodded in assent. "Then you don't need me to retell it for you. Long story short, the party comes across an old wooden mask that's feared by the locals for its sinister powers. It was said that it could move things by itself, send axes flying through the air, set guns firing and whatnot. John was fascinated with the thing. He was something of a kleptomaniac when it came to the exotic and bizarre – half the stuff you see in White Gate was collected by John. He had to have it.

"And, of course, the first thing he does when he gets back to England is uncrate the mask and display in the most prominent place he can think of, right over the fireplace in his study. I think he saw it as a sort of challenge, you know? To show the world that it was ridiculous to be scared of a piece of old wood."

"I can remember him bringing it back," recalled Lisa unenthusiastically. "It was such a horrible looking thing."

"It still is," added Andrew, in rare concord with his niece. He faced Charlie. "Your thoughts, Dr Woolham? You had the opportunity to inspect the mask earlier today: what's your professional opinion?"

Charlie adjusted his glasses. "The mask certainly is genuine. In fact it's quite an exquisite example of Kanak artistry. You know, Mr Paris, I can think of quite a few museums that would love to acquire it."

"I bet they would," purred Andrew. "And what can you tell us about the legends surrounding this mask?"

Dr Woolham spoke with a cautious confidence, relieved that there was finally a topic he could contribute to. "Well, masks in general hold an important place in the folklore of New Caledonia and right across the world. And as part of this, they're often considered to have magical powers. The Yaka people of Zaire credit their *kakunga* mask with the ability to leap over houses and move at superhuman speeds. Ancient Egyptian funerary masks, with their blue hair and gold skin, were made to help the wearer achieve a level of divinity after death. Even some European masquerades still carry traces of their magical origins, usually involving pagan beliefs related to crops or—"

"But what about cursed masks?" interjected Lisa, leaning forward. "I mean, is it possible for a mask like my dad's to channel negative energy and

harm people?"

Charlie warily cleared his throat, trying to avoid Andrew's sardonic grin. "Well, there are certainly plenty of masks that are said to have bad magic or something like a curse associated with them. And the idea that a mask can contain or control evil spirits is found among groups throughout the world. In some parts of Central Africa it's believed that if the uninitiated touch or simply go near a *maksishi* mask they will fall seriously ill. The Night Society masks of the Bangwa people are considered to be too powerful to be worn and even the initiated must only carry them on their shoulders. Masks this potent are often destroyed after use – by burning them, for instance, or by shooting them with arrows – to stop their magic falling into the wrong hands. And such beliefs were, until recently, was practiced in Melanesia."

He shuffled in his chair to face Andrew. "Now, when it comes to New Caledonian masks, we know that some of them did represent spirits or gods associated with the underworld, and that they might have been used in mourning ceremonies. But, beyond that, I'm afraid very little is known. The missionaries and their Old World diseases were ruthlessly successful in eradicating indigenous beliefs. I've looked and looked for any mention of the – the Hungry Corpse, as it's called, but I've been unable to find anything outside of your brother's book. Of course, there are obvious similarities to vengeful ghosts from other folklores: the Navajo *chindi*, for example, or the Romanian *strigoi*. Or the Jewish *dybbuk* – the clinger – a dislocated soul that possesses its victims. Frazer writes of angry spirits among the Samoans and Society Islanders who need to be appeased by offerings of blood. And there's the Japanese *onryo* and the Chinese *mogwai*. Or the Javanese *wewe gombel*, a female ghost who kidnaps children—" Sensing fatigue, the anthropologist cut short his lecture with evident reluctance. "But none of these quite match the Hungry Corpse and its unseen assassinations." Charlie eyed his host curiously. "It's almost as if it's an amalgamation of other folkloric legends. In fact, if I didn't know better I'd say there's even a touch of the Hollywood poltergeist to the whole moving-things-by-itself gimmick." He paused for a moment. "Speaking as an academic, the truth is that there's so much we don't know about these masks and their mythology that I can't really rule any of it out. But part of me wonders whether it wasn't just an attempt by the author to give us all a good scare."

Andrew pressed his fingertips together as he listened to Charlie. "You should trust your intuition, Dr Woolham. There's a very good reason been unable to find any other records of the Hungry Corpse, or of a mask that can send spears flying through the air or

guns firing of its own accord." Another slow sip of wine. "We made it up."

For a second even the clatter of cutlery stopped. Jared broke the silence with an uncertain laugh. "Wait, wait. You're saying the book's *fiction*? The whole thing? What about Tuckwell, the anthropologist? The English guy the natives killed for trying to take the mask?"

A smile tugged at Andrew's lips. "Not quite the whole thing. John and I really did travel to New Caledonia. The search party really did take place. But that's about it. For one thing, his name was Thornton, not Tuckwell. For another, he wasn't killed. When we found him he was in a pretty bad way with malaria, but he recovered soon enough once we got him back to Nouméa."

Lisa looked hurt. "But the mask! The legends, the curse – the whole story of dad and the expedition digging it up out of the ground?"

"A story, Lisa, as you yourself have just said. The mask itself is real, of course. But was never sealed in a coffin, wrapped in chains or buried underground. There was no excavation. The local Kanak chief simply gave it to us, I suspect out of relief for taking Thornton off his hands." Andrew Paris spread his hands in apologetic amusement. "The truth of the matter is that John's adventures were really quite dull. That's just

the nature of long distance travel, I'm afraid: an awful lot of getting there and very little being there. Had we given a faithful account of all those endless hikes, flights, drives and nights in hotels we wouldn't have sold a single copy. So we had to spice them up one way or another. And in the sixties I'm afraid we had a bit more licence to populate books with superstitious, wide-eyed natives." He stared into his wine for a moment. "All that Rider Haggard stuff seems rather crass, now," he added regretfully.

Lisa wasn't to be defeated so easily. "Then what was making the land and the villagers sick?"

"Heavy metal poisoning from a nearby nickel plant. The island's covered in them."

"But then what about the French captain, or whatever he was?" pressed Lisa. "The man who shot

himself in his tent? Did dad make him up too?"

For a moment the smile faded from Andrew's face. "Ah, well, yes. Lagarde did die, poor chap. That part at least is true." He looked up at his guests again. "But it was suicide, plain and simple. The only footprints into that tent were his own. The gun was his own. You don't need to bring in any ghouls or goblins to explain what happened."

Round one to Andrew Paris. Despite the sense of anti-climax, his retelling made much more sense, I had to admit. And yet something felt off. There was a renewed steeliness behind that relaxed erudite exterior; his determination to strip the mask of all spirituality and superstition felt a little like overcompensation. If the Hungry Corpse really was as unremarkable as Andrew insisted, then why was it so important to exorcise it?

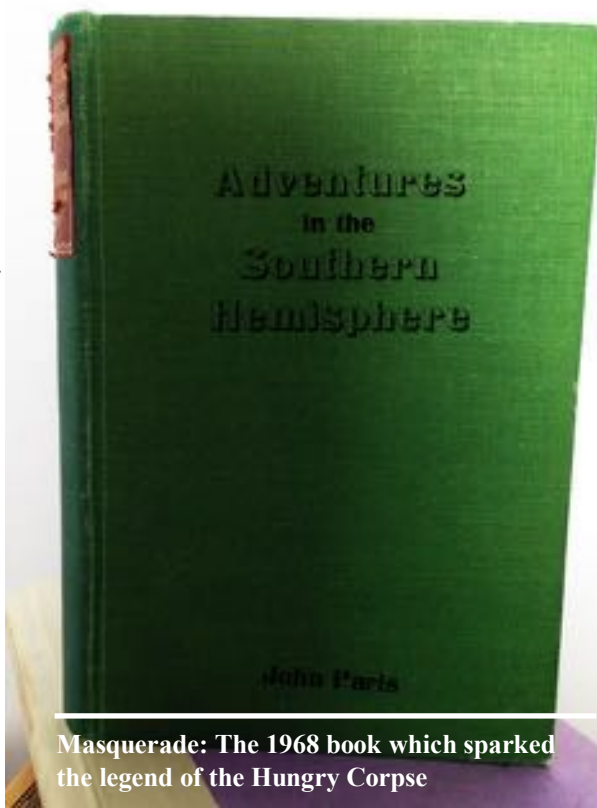
Brian's laughter cut through my thoughts. "Good Lord," he groaned, heaving himself upright in his chair, "you and John always were so bloody dramatic. Couldn't you just have opened with that?"

Andrew was unruffled. "And miss out on a fine evening together? What a waste of a confession that would be. Besides, it's your turn next, Brian. I think it would help everyone if you gave us an account of the 25th October 1973, from start to finish, as I suspect most people here have only heard it piecemeal thus far." He glanced at his niece. "If that's OK with Lisa, of

course."

Lisa gave a surly shrug. "Might as well. Since you've already invited everyone here." I squirmed inwardly. Outwardly, too. "Besides," she continued in a more conciliatory tone, "I've heard it all before."

"Right then," began Brian slowly, glancing uncertainly between uncle and niece. "You know, Andrew, it's a good thing you gave me advanced warning of this, because when I looked back at my notes from the time they were nothing like how I remembered that night. Amazing how your memories change over time." He folded his arms and looked off again into the middle distance. "It was, as you say, the 25th October 1973. A Thursday. Funny old year all round, what with the three-day week and the



Masquerade: The 1968 book which sparked the legend of the Hungry Corpse

power cuts and the oil crisis. Can you believe that what's-his-name Jenkin told us to brush our teeth in the dark?" Charlie and I glanced at each other, equally lost.

Brian dragged himself out of his reverie. "I'd just become a sergeant, although I wasn't on duty that evening. I'd lived in and around the area my whole life, so I knew John and Andrew pretty well by then. I can remember when the four of you first moved into White Gate. You could only have been three or four" he added, nodding warmly to Lisa. It struck me that Brian would have made a much better uncle than Andrew. "All of us were on friendly terms. On the night in question I was walking past White Gate on the way to the Stag and Pheasant – the pub, that is. Can you believe a pint cost just thirteen pence then? Anyway, I was coming here to pick up Andrew. Must have been around eight in the evening. Even back then it was our habit to go for a couple of pints every Thursday. John would occasionally join us, but – well, not that night."

"It was John's habit to lock himself up in his study when he was working, not to be disturbed" contributed Andrew. "He told me earlier in the day that he wanted to write up his notes on the Costa Rica trek, so I expected he'd pass on the pub."

"Which is what happened," continued Brian. "It was a cold night, so I'd popped inside for a minute while Andrew found his coat and shoes. That was when we saw John."

"How did he seem?" asked Lisa, hope and fear pulling at her voice.

Brian rubbed his chin. "You know, he seemed fine. As friendly and animated as ever. Stopped and said hello to me, asked how I was, excused himself from the pub. Said he had some work he wanted to crack on with and headed towards his study at the back of the house. The panelled room. We could both see the door of the study from where we were. And we both saw John go in, and we both saw him close the door – well, I did at least; Andrew can speak for himself."

But for once Andrew didn't speak. He merely nodded in agreement, a look of inscrutable melancholy crossing his face.

"That's the thing that stays with me," mull'd the retired detective. "How well he hid it." He suddenly slumped with sadness. "Look, Lisa, if this is too much, we can stop."

Lisa didn't speak either, but shook her head rapidly, her earrings tinkling. Outside, the wind had picked up in the dusky gloom. A few spots of rain hit the windows of the dining room.

Brian drew a big breath before carrying on. "So your uncle and I headed out to the pub. I remember the stars were starting to come out. We'd only

been walking a minute or two – the walk takes about ten minutes, would you say? – when Andrew here realises he's forgotten his keys. With you and your mum in the States it was only John in the house by then, of course, and there was no guarantee he'd still be up after the pub closed. So I waited while Andrew hurried back to the house.

"It couldn't have been more than three minutes before I heard the gunshot. It was a quiet night, and even at that distance I was certain what that sound was. I ran back to White Gate – I could go at a fair old pace back then – and as I got close I saw Andrew racing round the side of the house. 'It's John,' he said, and I think I instantly knew what had happened."

Andrew had been tracing some doodle in the tablecloth with his finger. "I was knocking on the front door when I heard the shot. Damn near jumped out of my skin. That Colt of his was always so bloody loud. I knocked again, but there was no response. Then I remembered that John's study has two windows facing out onto the garden at the back of the house. So I ran round. That's when I saw him – you know. Shot. I was about to break into the room when I heard footsteps from the front of the house. I went to see who it was. And that's when Brian saw me running around the side of the house."

Brian picked up the story. "I followed Andrew round to the back of the house. By the time I was outside the study Andrew was already trying to shift one of the sash windows, but the latch wasn't budging. I tried the other one to no avail. Both windows were latched from the inside. That's when I heard Andrew break one of the panes. He stuck his hand inside and undid the latch that way. That's how we got in." Brian's voice became clipped. "John was sitting at his desk, exactly as he would be as if he were working. His Colt Python was still in his hand. I checked his pulse, but he was already dead. Shot himself through the heart."

"The heart?" I blurted out. I couldn't help myself. It seemed like an odd choice for suicide. "Did you come across many deaths like that in your time as a policeman?"

Brian scratched his bald head. "No. And it's the one thing that I didn't like about that study. But I searched that room from top to bottom. No secret entrances, hidden doors or anything like that. Nothing."

Sympathy rumbled his fleshy face as he looked at Lisa. "Now, Lisa, I know it's a horrible thing to hear, but I'm not going to lie to you. It had to have been suicide. Those windows were shut tight from the inside. And the door was locked from the inside as well. The key was still in the lock. There's no way it could have been anything else. No other interpretation of that room that makes sense." Round

two to Andrew.

Lisa, however, wasn't budging. "You mean there's no other *physical* interpretation of that room, Brian," she insisted. Her self-assured resolve had stubbornly reasserted itself. She really was a Paris. "You're still all making the same mistake of assuming physical evidence can explain everything. So my dad elaborated his account of finding the mask. So his study was sealed up like a lockbox. None of that rules out the possibility that other forces were at work. The world is full of mysteries that Western science can't explain: feng shui, acupuncture, Chinese medicine. Right Karen?"

"I was born in Coventry," I protest feebly.

Lisa's renewed proselytising roused Andrew from his gloomy reminiscences. The old sardonic smile rekindled. "And this return to the supernatural is where I come in tonight. So far we've learnt that the legends surrounding the mask are fake. We've also heard how there could have been no one else in John's study on the night in question. Conclusion: my brother committed suicide that night." He rose from his chair. "Of course, if this is to be a scientific investigation there's one more thing we need to do. Right, Dr Woolham?"

Charlie looked back at him warily. "We need to test our conclusion," he answered quietly.

"Correct. Everyone, follow me."

Lisa, Jared, Brian, Charlie and I followed Andrew Paris out of the dining room and across the hall, confusion clinging to us like cobwebs. The darkness of the night pressed in at the windows of White Gate. Our host led us towards the back of the house and stopped in front of a large, heavysset oak panelled door. He fished a stocky brass key from his pocket. "This," he announced, turning the key with a heavy clang, "is John's study. The panelled room."

The five of us shuffled in after our host. The first thing to hit me was the smell of dust and old books. "Last cleaned a few months ago, I'm afraid," muttered Andrew apologetically, turning on the lights and gazing up at the cobwebbed ceiling. "I don't normally ask Katrina to bother with this room."

I looked around the study with morbid curiosity. It was a fairly small room, about fifteen by twenty feet, and the low ceiling and dark wood panelling made it seem smaller still. The door we'd entered through was in the centre of one of the longer walls. An enormous beam, dark and glossy with age, ran the length of the once-white ceiling. An eye-watering orange and brown shag rug sat conspicuously in the centre of the wooden floor. To our right

as we entered, John's imposing desk and leather wing armchair stood before a wall of overloaded bookcases. His typewriter, I noticed with a pang of sympathy, still had a sheet of paper lodged in it, as if he had only left the room for a moment. To our left, an oversized brick fireplace, its back wall stained black with a century of smoke, sat cold and forlorn in the far wall. Either side of it were the two solidly-built sash windows. And above it hung the Hungry Corpse.

It was indeed a horrible looking thing. The Hungry Corpse was a life-sized wooden mask, roughly hewn from wood and liberally covered in a thick coat of coal-black paint. Its most prominent feature was an elaborately carved and extravagantly hooked nose, which curved straight down like the bill of some vicious bird of prey. The eyes were narrow and leering under the accentuated brow, their mother-of-pearl inlays reflecting the room's dim light with an unsettling glint. The large, squarish mouth bared its broken, peg-like teeth in a silent scream. I stepped forward to get a closer look. The remnants of a moth-eaten mantle of feathers, long since drained of colour, still clung to the back of the mask. Attached to its base were dreadlocks of dark human hair, forming a curious foot-long beard. On top was a pile of tightly coiled hair, dry and brittle with age. Patches had fallen from the mask, giving the Hungry Corpse a suitably moribund appearance. I drew back with a shiver. Even knowing its tropic-gothic origins nothing more than a pulp writer's theatrics, the mask oozed a dark, sticky malevolence.

I managed to drag myself away from it. "It's certainly very striking," I told Andrew. "I can see why John wanted it so much."

"Have you done anything to this room since John's death?" asked Brian distractedly as he rummaged through the papers still scattered over John's desk. "All this stuff is dated to '73."

Andrew cast his gaze over the study. "No. I haven't touched this room. The idea of even throwing away one book feels like I'd be throwing away a part of John. It's sentimental, I know." That explained the rug, I thought. "Even his old Colt Python is still in his desk drawer, though that really ought to go by now."

Lisa took a step towards the fireplace, arms folded across her chest. "Did these windows have curtains when my dad used this room?" she enquired in a curious monotone.

Andrew scratched his head. "No, I don't think they did. I'm not sure they ever did, come to think of it."

"And dad definitely locked the door to this room?" she continued in the same strained voice,

Face your fears: The distinctive profile of the Hungry Corpse looms over John Paris' old desk in the panelled room at White Gate



absorbed by whatever thought had crossed her mind.

Andrew sighed wearily. "You know that, Lisa. The key was still in the lock when we found him."

Lisa fixed her large hazel eyes on her uncle. An indescribable tension charged the air like electricity. "And you're sure you haven't changed the study in any way?"

"No," he repeated, shaking his head in bewil-

derment at his niece. "This is exactly how it was in 1973. Which is precisely the point."

"Sorry?" snapped Jared, his bonhomie cracking under the strain of the evening.

"The experiment I've been talking about," tantalised Andrew. "In order to test our conclusion—"

"*Your* conclusion," corrected Lisa.

Her uncle continued as if he hadn't heard. "In order to test our conclusion that John's death was a suicide, and not the workings of that mask over there, I will spend the night here in John's study. I will latch the windows and lock the door from the inside, exactly as it was over seventeen years ago. When I emerge tomorrow morning, live and kicking, I think we can all agree that there's nothing sinister about this room or its contents. And we can let John rest in peace." He looked again at Lisa. "Agreed?"

Lisa returned his gaze with something approaching ferocity. "Agreed."

"Then it's settled," declared Andrew with an enthusiasm that seemed oddly out of place. He turned to me and Charlie. "I suppose I should show you two your rooms first."

It was only when I grabbed my bag and followed Andrew upstairs that I realised how tired I was. How was it only half eleven? "Well, you certainly host interesting dinner parties," I managed say in between stifled yawns. "You don't think it was a bit hard on Lisa though, springing this on her?"

"Lisa?" replied Andrew distantly, as if her feelings hadn't crossed his mind. Perhaps they hadn't. "Lisa's an adult. She'll be fine. The sooner she stops swallowing all this New Age garbage the better, and I think it's right I help her in that. It's a shame, really," he sighed, and I thought I caught a glimpse of genuine pity. "She was such an intelligent girl. She probably still is, if she would only stop genuflecting to every Long Beach bum that calls himself a mystic and actually think for herself for a moment."

The three of us came to a halt halfway down a crooked corridor. "Right," pondered Andrew. "This room's yours, Dr Woolham, and this one is yours, Miss Yu. Lisa and Jared are staying down there—" he motioned further down the corridor "—right above me in John's study, as it happens. See you back there in a minute." And with that he headed back downstairs.

"Well," I exhaled, learning wearily against the doorframe to my room. "I've had weirder Friday nights."

"I haven't," replied a perplexed Charlie. He took off his oversized glasses and rubbed his eyes. "What on earth is going on? Who organises something like this?" He let out a short, bemused laugh. "Do you reckon you can salvage something from this for your magazine?"

It was a good question. "I'm sure I'll think of something," I responded pessimistically. "Nothing to trouble Woodward and Bernstein, that's for sure."

We dumped our bags and returned to the panelled room. Lisa and Jared must have headed to their room, for the study contained only Andrew, leaning over the fireplace.

"You're lighting a fire?" cried Charlie, horrified.

Andrew looked up, eyebrows raised quizzically. "Of course. It's chilly in here. I never got central heating installed in this room; I never planned to use it, you see. Besides, a fire had been lit when John was last here."

The anthropologist was aghast. "But the mask! It's right above the fireplace — the heat and smoke will damage it. Can't you move it?"

Now it was Andrew's turn to look shocked. "Move it? And change the parameters of the experiment? Sorry, Dr Woolham, but no: we need this room exactly as it was that October night. And this is where the mask was." Charlie winced at the first pop of the fire. "Tell you what," continued Andrew, standing up straight and dusting his hands. "As soon as this experiment is over I'll give the mask to you, as thanks for your cooperation. It's not as if I'll need it any more. What do you say?"

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but before he could Lisa and Jared returned to the panelled room. Lisa, I noticed with envy, had already changed into her pyjamas. Her arms looked strangely bare without their usual blazonry of bangles and bracelets.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Uncle Andrew?" She eyed the grimacing mask warily. "You're playing with very dangerous forces. There'll be no judgement if you choose to back out."

Andrew Paris was not to be dissuaded. "Lisa, this mask had been in John's study since 1965. Your father spent many nights alone here. So why on earth would the mask wait until 1973 before striking?"

Lisa's response was odd. "Maybe it was just waiting for the right time."

For a split second I thought I saw something like fear in Andrew's clear blue eyes, but if it was ever there it was gone in a flash. "Remember, Lisa, we agreed," he replied in a schoolmasterly tone. "You'll drop this talk tomorrow morning." Once again our host clapped his hands together heartily. "Right, everyone out. Where's Brian?"

"Coming, coming," came Brian's weary voice from across the hall. He plodded towards us, wiping his hands on the back of his corduroy trousers. Andrew ushered the rest of us out of the panelled room and regarded us from the doorway, his hand on the doorknob. He reminded me of a magician addressing his audience moments before performing some death-defying illusion.

"Dr Woolham, is there any reason I should be afraid of that mask?"

"No," answered Charlie. "But I have to stress that this is a terrible environment to keep so valuable an artefact in—"

"Yes, yes," dismissed Andrew breezily. He turned to the retired detective. "Brian, is there any way, once I seal this room, that someone else could get in or out?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Good. And just to confirm that, once I lock this door, one of you give it a good shove." Andrew Paris regarded his assembled guests with a satisfied smile. "Then I'll see you all for breakfast. I take my coffee black." And with that he closed the door. The key turned noisily in the lock.

"What a bloody showman," despaired Brian. With a weary sigh he stepped up to the door. "I'm going to try and open the door now," he called. He rattled the doorknob and tried to force the door as instructed, but it wasn't budging. No sound came from inside the room. Brian relented, a little out of breath. "Not a chance. Whoever built this house did a cracking job." He called out again. "OK, Andrew, we're off now. See you tomorrow." Still no response. Brian shrugged and stepped away. "Well then, I'm off. I'll see you all in the morning, I suppose." His shoulders sagged. "Lisa, I – I'm sorry about all this. Just ignore your uncle. I think he's so busy telling everyone to get over your dad's death that he never stopped to get over it himself. Right. See you tomorrow." And off he plodded off towards the front door. We all headed to bed soon after.

I'm in the panelled room. I know I am, despite the treacle-thick darkness that fills the study. *You can't keep it here*, mourns the voice of Dr Charles Woolham from somewhere in the blackness. *We shouldn't even be doing this*, chimes Lisa from another corner of the room. Have I interrupted something? Ahead of me I notice two thin crescents of silvery light. A pair of eyes. The eyes of the Hungry Corpse. As I step closer the light brightens, illuminating the grotesque features of the mask. Suddenly Andrew Paris is behind me, arms folded. *You have to*, he insists in a voice like ice, peering down his glasses at me in disdain. *You have to*. I approach the mask. Hands outstretched, I lift it off the wall, trying hard not to touch the dry and matted hair. But as I do so a sound emerges from the mask. A rasping, unearthly scream, growing louder and louder –

Something snaps me out of my dream. Something loud. Suddenly awake, I lie motionless under the covers, desperately trying to make sense of the darkness in the room and the confusion in my head. What was that noise? I peer at the alarm clock: 00:45. I must have only just fallen asleep.

Suddenly that noise again – a kind of clunk

and scrape. Propping myself up on my elbows, I eye the corners of the room for any sign of movement, annoyed at my own fear. Then I hear the wind, and look at the window, and see the branches bobbing against the pane. Clunk and scrape. I realise I've been holding my breath and let myself deflate back down onto the mattress. I need to get a grip, I tell myself, stuffing my face back into the pillow.

And that was when all hell broke loose.

Another sound shakes the house, and this time it most definitely is not the wind. It's a gunshot. My mind finally gets into gear: Andrew – the panelled room – the Colt. *He's just fired that gun*. I fall out of bed, disentangling the sheets from my legs as I stumble to the door. Out in the dimly lit corridor I collide with an equally confused Charlie, his face smudged and his hair somehow piled even higher than before. He looks exposed without his glasses.

"Did you hear that?" I hiss.

"That bang?" he asks, rubbing the corner of his eye. "Of course I did. What the hell was it?"

"Charlie, I think it was a –" A second shot cuts me off. *He's just fired that gun again*. A wave of freezing horror washes over my skin, as if I'd just been plunged into icy water. "Charlie," I yelp, pulling him by his T-shirt as I head for the stairs, "it's a gun!"

"Wait! Stop!" stammers Charlie, tumbling down the stairs after me like a baby elephant. Reaching the ground floor, I squint into the gloom, trying to remember the layout of White Gate. Where's the light switch for the hallway? Where, for that matter, are Lisa and Jared? Other than the indifferent tick of the grandfather clock no other noise had emanated from the house since the second gunshot.

Catching up with me, Charlie grabs my arm and pulls me to look at him. There was fear in his eyes now. "Stop," he repeats, his voice suddenly hoarse. "Just stop and think about what you're doing. If that was a gunshot, then why on earth are you running *towards* it? Shouldn't we call the police?"

I push myself away from him and begin to grope for a light switch. "I'm not worried about us," I explain, although I feel nowhere near as cavalier as I sound. "It's Andrew. John's gun is still in that study, remember? And, well –" again that icy horror licks my skin "– we know what happened in that room last time." My fingers connect with the round Bakelite switch and I flick it on. The hallway materialises before me, unchanged from how it had appeared little more than an hour earlier – there's the intricate parquet flooring, the amethyst geode, the pair of Arabian scimitars. And there's Charlie at the bottom of the stairs, blinking in the brittle light, one hand gripping the newel as if he risks being swept away. For a second the image of two grown adults running around a

house in their pyjamas flips in my mind from horror to comedy, and I have a sudden urge to laugh at the pair of us. Then I remember that hook-nosed mask leering over the body of John Paris, and any humour shrivels like a burst balloon. "The study," I breathe, and begin scrambling my way to the back of the house. I hear Charlie let out a moan before following.

The door to the panelled room looms before us, somehow bigger and more solid than it had appeared earlier that night. A thin stream of light shines out from the bottom of the door, but no sound comes from within. I knock on the door. "Andrew?" I call out. Now it's my voice that's grown hoarse. "Mr Paris? Are you OK? We heard a – a bang." No reply. I try the doorknob. Locked, of course. A thumping fear begins to rise up inside me, beating against my ribs like a caged animal. I try looking through the keyhole.

"What can you see?" asks Charlie.

"Nothing," I reply, straightening up. "The key's still in the lock. Which means he must still be in there. We've got to get this door open!" It's then that I take a proper look at Charlie, appreciating for the first time tonight the man's frame. "You have to break this door down," I order.

A weak laugh escapes Charlie's lips. "Karen," he pleads, holding his hands up as if to defend himself, "what do you think this is, *Miami Vice*? Locked doors don't just ping open with a shove."

"What good is it being ten feet tall," I reply, positioning myself behind him and steering him towards the door, "if you're not going to use it to break down this door right—"

"What's going on?" Somehow Lisa has appeared by our side. She's surprisingly stealthy without the constant clatter of her jewellery. "What are you two doing? What's with all the banging?" She pulls her dressing gown tight around her, a wild, wary look in her eyes.

I step away from Charlie. "Lisa, something's wrong. We heard gunshots, and there's no reply coming from the study, and your uncle—" I stop myself from saying the words. I point to the door. "We need to get inside, but it's locked."

For a second Lisa simply looks at the pair of us, an opaque expression on her face. Does she trust us? We are, after all, strangers in her uncle's house. She breathes in through her nose, lips pressed tight together. The grandfather clock counts away the seconds. "The windows," she finally utters, springing back into life. "We can get in through the windows. Like Uncle Andrew and Brian did. They face out onto the garden." And now she's padding back down the hallway to the front door, picking up the weighty

front door key from the side table. Charlie and I follow. Lisa motions to a scruffy row of boots and wellies by the front door. "Help yourselves, I suppose" she offers uncertainly as she unbolts the door. "I think it's wet out there."

A whip of wind greets us as we step out into the watery night. The occasional smack of rain can be heard on the leaves above us. Branches clatter together like bones. Lisa fishes a torch out of her dressing gown pocket (what was that doing there?) and leads the way round the side of the house. I crash behind her in oversized wellies, following the narrow torch beam along the gravel and grass. The ground is soft and slippery under foot, and more than once I have to catch myself against the rough brick of the house. Shadows twitch and jump in the wind. Something snags in my hair. I suddenly feel very vulnerable in just my pyjamas.

We round the corner of the house. Before us stretches White Gate's overgrown garden, unfamiliar and sinister in the darkness. Lisa swings the torch across the lawn, but other than a pair of gardening gloves lying on the grass nothing appears in its beam. Up ahead I recognise two sash windows, yellowish light spilling out of them onto the lawn. The windows to the study. The three of us, with Lisa at the front, slow down as we approach the windows, afraid of what we might find. Even the wind seems to drop for a moment. Lisa steps up to the nearest window and I see her eyes grow wide. Slowly, silently, she presses one hand to her mouth.

I try to find my voice. "What is it?" I whisper.

Lisa shuffles slowly to face us, her back pressed against the window as if to shield us from the scene inside. It takes a few seconds for her eyes to meet mine. "He's not moving," is all she says.

I step up to the window. Lisa doesn't budge. It's as if she's fixed to the spot. Looking over her shoulder, I peer into the panelled room. A wave of incomprehension hits me. Something awful has happened in that room. The desk draws have been wrenched open and their contents flung about the study – papers, letters and folders lie scattered around the study as if a bomb had gone off. The desk itself has been pushed right across the room so that its front blocks the door. The leather armchair is on its side. Books have been thrown across the room. And there, lying on the lurid brown and orange shag rug, is the body of Andrew Paris. A bewildered, glassy look fogs his eyes and a deep crimson stain soaks his shirt front. Beside him, a foot or so away from his right hand, lays the Colt. A dislocating dizziness swoops over me and I back woozily away from the window, reaching out to support myself

against a tree.

"The windows latched from the inside," pants Lisa, attempting to pull at the frame. "Karen – check the other one."

I stagger over to the other window, marvelling at Lisa's command of the situation. I force myself to inspect the window, trying hard not to look inside. This one, too, is latched from the inside. I give the lower sash a yank, but it doesn't budge. The windows are sealed tight. A spot of rain strikes my cheek.

"We need to break one of the panes," I hear Lisa say. Without moving from the window she points to a patch of ground near Charlie. "Dr Woolham, grab that rock." Charlie obliges, handing her something a little bigger than a tennis ball. Lisa weighs it in her hand and looks at the window. "OK," she whispers to herself, before glancing at me and Charlie. "Stand back. Cover your eyes." Shielding her face with her arm, she plunges the stone through a pane in front of her. The glass shatters easily. Pulling the sleeve of her dressing gown down over her hand, she gingerly she clears the remaining shards of glass still clinging the frame. Then with shaking fingers she reaches inside and unfastens the latch.

Only now does Lisa step back from the window. Without warning her composure melts away, and Charlie has to reach out and catch her from crumbling to fall the floor. "Oh God," she whimpers, staring with wide and teary eyes into the panelled room. "Oh God."

Charlie looks to me in silent, panicked appeal: with Lisa drooping limply from his arms it was up to me to enter the panelled room. I nod reluctantly and approach the window, grateful for a sudden a blast of cold wind on my face.

The sash, despite its bulk, lifts easily. I clamber in. Shards of glass crunch underfoot as I step onto the wooden floor. I glance at the chaotic state of the room – the strewn papers, the overturned furniture – in dazed terror. What the hell happened here? And what, I wondered distantly, was that harsh, acrid smell? That definitely wasn't here when I was last in this room less than two hours ago.

I realise with a flush of guilt that I've been avoiding looking at the body on the floor. I close my eyes and breath in. There's nothing for it. I approach Andrew and kneel down beside him, only to be hit by a numbing, yawning blankness. What do I do? The blood is so much darker than in the movies.

Check the pulse, says an impatient voice in my head.

I place two trembling fingers on his jugular. Is that the right one? His body is warm. I take a few breaths to steady myself and feel for a beat. Nothing. Outside a gust of wind howls through the trees. Still

nothing. Somewhere beyond White Gate a dog barks.

And then a beat.

I dissolve in relief as I find his pulse. It's there, and it feels steady. "Lisa, Charlie," I call, my mouth as dry as sand. "He's alive."

The news pulls Lisa out of her paralysis. "What?" she whispers, her eyes growing clear once more. She releases herself from Charlie and approaches the window. "He's not dead?"

I shake my head. "But he needs help." I can't tell if my voice is quiet or loud. "Someone get an ambulance. Now." Charlie nods and crashes back round to the front of the house. Lisa climbs in through the window, somehow managing to make the manoeuvre look far simpler than my bow-legged attempt. But she clings to the side of the room, unwilling to come near her uncle.

I return to Andrew. In his slippers, corduroy trousers and cardigan he looks like a very old man all of a sudden. His eyelids flicker and open slightly, roused by the commotion. He looks at me weakly, and I can't tell if he recognises my face. "Pain," he utters, no more than a whisper. "The pain." He winces, trying to lift his head. "The pain." With infinite effort he lifts his left arm and points behind me. I follow the line of his finger: the Hungry Corpse stares back at me. Round three to the mask.

I've since tried several times to write about the hours that followed these events – the small eternity waiting for the ambulance; the heaving of his limp body by the paramedics; the smothering silence that descended on the house as he was sped away; the sickening realisation that my hands were still smeared in his blood – but my memories of the rest of that night are such a blur that I could never do it. My main recollection after the arrival of the ambulance was the relief at being able to finally leave that room. Whether it was the unblinking gaze of the Hungry Corpse, or the frantic disarray of the furniture, or the lingering bitter smell in that study, something was making me very uncomfortable as I sat beside Andrew's body.

Jared called the hospital sometime in the early hours: as anyone who's been following this story will know, the wound wasn't fatal. Andrew was – is – alive, but it was touch and go, and he lost consciousness for good in the ambulance. As of writing this, on Monday 3rd June, Andrew Paris is still in a critical condition at hospital from a bullet wound to the stomach, unable to tell us what happened to him in the panelled room that Friday night.

At some point before dawn, when the sky was already softening, I gave up pretending to sleep and

and headed back downstairs. I found Jared, already dressed in chinos and a polo shirt, alone in the kitchen.

"Coffee?" he offered, seeing me enter. Even with little to no sleep he remained an attractive man. I accepted gratefully and slumped exhausted into a chair, feeling significantly less attractive in my faded Minnie Mouse sweatshirt.

"How's Lisa?" I dared to ask.

"She's a little shook up, as you can imagine," replied Jared with a worn-out smile. "Not that she and her uncle were particularly close. But after what happened to her dad, I think it's all a bit too much. She'll be OK though, I know. She's strong." He glanced outside. "She's actually healing with some outdoor yoga right now." I peered out the window to find Lisa on the dew-dropped grass, effortlessly contorting herself into positions I would have sworn were anatomically impossible.

I returned to the kitchen table, marvelling just as much at the woman's renewed composure as her flexibility. Jared set down a cup of coffee beside me and joined me at the table. "Andrew's experiment really blew up in his face, right? He sets out to debunk a legend, and ends up becoming part of it. Talk about shooting yourself in your foot – or stomach, I should say." I looked up at Jared, surprised by his remark. An ember of triumph glowed in his brown eyes.

"Jared, you're not happy about what happened, are you?"

"Oh, God no," he grieved, frowning handsomely. "What I mean is that I hope Mr Paris learns something from this experience – for his own sake, of course. This guy spends his life taunting forces he refuses to understand. It seems like one of those forces finally hit back." He took a sip of coffee. "It's not as if he wasn't warned."

I felt my journalistic scepticism begin to switch back on. "Wait. You really believe the mask is responsible for this?"

"Do you have any better suggestion?" he countered pleasantly. "You know as well as anyone that the study was sealed tight. We all heard Andrew lock the door. You saw how those windows were closed from the inside. And Andrew's old police friend was adamant that there was no other way in or out. So the idea that it could have been someone else who fired the gun is out of the question. And Andrew

Paris didn't strike me last night as a man entertaining suicidal thoughts. Remember, he even told us he'd see us all at breakfast! So if you have a better explanation for what happened in there, Miss Yu, I'd love to hear it." So would I, I ruminated gloomily.

I spent the rest of the morning getting what information I could from Jared, Lisa, Charlie, and, when he unsuspectingly turned up, Brian. But no one could offer any solution as to what might have happened. I inspected the panelled room again, but even in the sanity of daylight those four walls yielded nothing I could make sense of. By lunchtime I was desperate to leave White Gate.

"What the hell are we looking at here?" I asked Charlie as we stood on the steps outside the front door. "Are we supposed to believe that something in that room is so terrifying that it drove two

grown men to shoot themselves? Or that some – some force managed to fire the gun by itself?"

The anthropologist opened his mouth to speak, but no answers came forth. He simply stood there, gaping gormlessly down at me in discombobulation. I thought it summed up the past eighteen hours rather succinctly.

"Well, it was nice knowing you," I eventually replied. "I hope the rest of your weekend

is much, much more boring."

"Don't worry about that," responded Charlie. "I'm marking first year essays. After all that's happened here I'm actually looking forward to it."

I crunched across the gravel drive to my Austin Metro. What happened in the panelled room last night? I asked myself for the umpteenth time. Ironically, the one man I knew who was capable of unravelling this mystery was the one man I couldn't ask. Andrew Paris lay fighting for his life in a hospital bed some twenty miles away, a silent testament to the problem of the panelled room. ■

What happened in the panelled room last night? The one man I knew who was capable of unravelling this mystery was the one man I couldn't ask.